Social researchers' perceptions of ethics review: the role of scientific domain, methodology and ethical position

by

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Declaration

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, increased focus has been placed on the importance of research ethics review at higher education institutions. Although this has been welcomed by many academics, various authors have criticised ethics-review processes on both practical and principled grounds. Commonly expressed points of critique are that the ethics-review process is too bureaucratic, and that that it imposes natural science principles on the social sciences. This study was conducted at a university in South Africa, to measure the ethics-review-related orientations of academics who have sought ethical clearance for their social research through the university's research ethics committee (REC) for the humanities. A cross-sectional research design was applied, using a quantitative survey. A questionnaire designed specifically for the study was administered online. A composite measure of overall orientation towards the REC was calculated, which revealed that, on average, the orientation of social researchers towards the REC is fairly positive. It further emerged that this overall orientation is related to scientific domain, in that researchers in the social sciences and humanities were more inclined than their counterparts in other domains to have an overall negative orientation towards the REC. This inclination is also related to methodological preference, as social researchers who prefer mostly qualitative methods are less inclined to have a positive overall orientation towards the REC. Thirdly, this thesis found that researchers' ethical positions play a role in their overall orientation towards the REC: academics who hold ethical positions characterised by high levels of relativism are least inclined to have a positive orientation towards the REC. This study also probed the tendency among researchers to make conscious decisions concerning their and their students' research topics and designs, in order to avoid a difficult and/or lengthy ethics-review process. Such decisions were found to be most prominent among researchers in the social sciences and humanities, and among those who prefer qualitative methods. By interpreting these findings, this thesis assists the REC in focusing future initiatives, but also makes a contribution to a growing body of literature on the ethics review of social research, both in South Africa and globally.

Opsomming

Oor die afgelope paar dekades word meer klem gelê op die belang van navorsingsetiek-oorsig by hoër-onderwysinstellings. Alhoewel dit deur baie akademici verwelkom word, lewer verskeie outeurs kritiek op etiek-oorsigprosesse op sowel praktiese as beginselgronde. Algemene kritiekpunte is dat die etiek-oorsigproses te burokraties is, en natuurwetenskaplike beginsels op die sosiale wetenskappe oplê. Hierdie ondersoek is by 'n universiteit in Suid-Afrika onderneem, om die etiek-oorsigverwante oriëntasies te meet van akademici wat etiese goedkeuring vir hul sosiale navorsing versoek het van die universiteit se navorsingsetiekkomitee (NEK) vir die geesteswetenskappe. ‘n Kruis-seksionele navorsingsontwerp is toegepas, deur die gebruik van 'n kwantitatiewe opname. 'n Vraelys wat spesifiek vir die ondersoek ontwerp is, is aanlyn geadministreer. 'n Saamgestelde meting van algehele oriëntasie teenoor die NEK is bereken, wat aan die lig gebring dat oriëntering van sosiale navorsers gemiddeld redelik positief is. Dit het verder na vore gekom dat hierdie algehele oriëntasie verband hou met wetenskaplike domein, in die opsig dat navorsers in die sosiale en geesteswetenskappe meer geneig as eweknieë in ander domeine om 'n algehele negatiewe oriëntasie teenoor die NEK te hê. Hierdie geneigdheid hou ook verband met metodologiese voorkeur, aangesien sosiale navorsers wat meestal kwalitatiewe metodes verkies, minder geneig is om 'n positiewe algehele oriëntering teenoor die NEK te hê. Derdens het hierdie tesis bevind dat navorsers se etiese posisies 'n rol speel in hul algehele oriëntasie teenoor die NEK: akademici wat etiese posisies inneem wat deur hoë vlakke van relativisme gekenmerk word, is die minste geneig om 'n positiewe algehele oriëntasie teenoor die NEK te hê. Hierdie ondersoek het ook die neiging gepeil by navorsers om bewustelike besluite te neem met betrekking tot hul of hul studente se navorsingsonderwerpe en/of -ontwerpe, ten einde ‘n moeilike en/of lang etiek-oorsigproses te vermy. Sulke besluite is bevind as mees prominent by navorsers in die sosiale en geesteswetenskappe, en by diegene wat kwalitatiewe metodes verkies. Deur hierdie bevindinge te interpreteer, help hierdie tesis die NEK om hul toekomstige inisiatiewe te fokus, maar lewer ook ‘n bydrae tot 'n toenemende versameling van literatuur oor die etiek-oorsig van sosiale navorsing, beide in Suid-Afrika en wêreldwyd.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

During the past few decades, there has been an increase in emphasis on ethical aspects of social research practices, and today, ethical considerations constitute the focus of discussions on social research more than ever in the past. It would be reasonable to assume that this concern arose primarily because of unethical research practices that occurred in the past. However, concerns among research institutions, such as universities, about their reputations for conducting sound ethical research have also contributed to this focus on ethical research practices (Bryman, 2012:131).

It is also interesting to consider the impact that legislation may have on research ethics regulation and ultimately, what the effect would be on research institutions, such as universities. To illustrate with an example, one could refer to the National Health Act 61 of 2003 (Republic of South Africa, 2003; hereafter referred to as "the National Health Act"). It is possible to follow the trajectory of the National Health Act's efforts to contribute to ethics-review regulation – particularly through work done by Anne Strode and her colleagues from 2005 to 2013 (Strode, Slack & Essack, 2010; Strode, Slack, Wassenaar & Singh, 2007; Strode, Grant, Slack & Mushariwa, 2005). As a result of the National Health Act's operationalisation by the Health Minister in 2012 (Strode, 2013), social researchers interested in research involving minors (the majority of which would be classified as "non-therapeutic" research) were required to obtain ministerial consent before their research could commence. They, as well as research ethics committees tasked to review their applications for conducting such research, were therefore placed under a greater bureaucratic burden than before[1].

However, in September 2014 (Republic of South Africa, 2014), an amendment made by the Health Minister pertaining to Section 71(3) in the National Health Act resulted in the delegation of the authority to give consent for non-therapeutic research on minors to appropriate bodies, including university research ethics committees. The impact that the legal requirement for ministerial consent might have had on the volume and/or nature of research on minors would have been worth studying, and was considered as a topic for this thesis. However, the amendment to the National Health Act in 2014 rendered such an endeavour obsolete. This thesis is partly driven by the need to consider the possible effects of "problematic" research–ethics

[1]According to the National Health Act, "[w]here research or experimentation is to be conducted on a minor for a non-therapeutic purpose, the research or experimentation may only be conducted–
(i) in such a manner and on such conditions as may be prescribed;
(ii) with consent of the Minister;
(iii) with consent of the parent or guardian of the minor; and
(iv) if the minor is capable of understanding, the consent of the minor" (Republic of South Africa, 2003).

regulation on the social sciences, but also to understand research decisions social scientists may take in an attempt to avoid what they perceive to be obstacles posed by the ethics review system.

Throughout this thesis I will be using the term research ethics committee (REC) to refer to a formally constituted group of suitably qualified people who have mandated authority (institutional or national) to review, and approve, primarily from an ethics perspective, research involving human participants. Other terms that tend to be used interchangeably with REC include institutional review board, ethics review board, and ethics review committee (Kruger, Ndebele & Horn, 2014). As is often the case with theoretical definitions, however, in practice RECs do not always meet the criteria of this definition. This is especially the case in developing countries, where resources are often limited, and where work by Kruger *et al*. (2014) constitute much-needed initiatives geared towards providing African research institutions and RECs with a valuable resource to improve research ethics regulation and review.

During 2014, I served as the student representative on a REC for humanities research at a South African university. The experience I gained in this regard has played a role in sparking my research interest in the ethics-review process, and it highlighted the fact that ethics review is controversial in South Africa. As will be shown in the literature review, research ethics review, as it is currently practiced, sometimes poses unique challenges to researchers conducting qualitative research, especially when the research involves minors. I also found, on the basis of informal discussions with researchers and members of the REC, that differences exist among researchers, and between researchers and those tasked to review their applications for ethical clearance, in terms of their ethical stances, i.e. their approach to, and conceptualisation of, ethical issues.

This thesis is based on an acknowledgement of the importance of understanding researchers' perceptions with regard to research ethics review. As the literature review in Chapter 2 will reveal, researchers' trust in, and acceptance of, the processes of institutionalised research ethics review, will determine whether they respect and adhere to those processes. As the literature review further shows, research ethics review in the form of institutionalised RECs has been heavily criticised by social scientists. The ethics review process is often described as too bureaucratic, and critiqued for imposing natural science principles on social science disciplines. Although the ethics review process is regarded as restrictive by biomedical researchers and social researchers alike, there seems to be a unique, principled discontentment amongst social researchers towards institutionalised ethics review. I will discuss this in more detail in the literature review chapter.

This study was, in part, an effort to build upon a previous study on ethics review in a developing country, which involved a survey of South African social scientists' experiences with ethics review processes (Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009). Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) state that their study is a preliminary one, and encourage further research in this area. In addition to responding to this call, this thesis makes a contribution by not merely considering pragmatic research ethics related issues, as the abovementioned study did, but to also delve into the

possibility that issues of principle (i.e. ethical position), preferred methodological approach, and scientific domain[2] underlie the orientations of social researchers towards ethics review.

Informal discussions with researchers showed that there is a possibility that based on their ethical position, researchers may view and experience the REC differently. Authors such as Guillemin and Gillam (2004), Hemmings (2006) and Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) have also alluded to this. Preferred methodological approach (qualitative, quantitative or both) (Bryman, 2012:35) is of interest because, some authors, such as Van den Hoonaard (2001), mention that qualitative researchers experience the REC differently to quantitative researchers. This will be discussed in more detail in the following literature review. The concern with scientific domain stems from the assumption that differences among disciplines in terms of topics researched and research designs applied would lead to researchers from various disciplines to differ in terms of their orientation towards the REC. Also, authors such as Ferraro *et al*. (1999), De Vries, DeBruin and Goodgame (2004), and Keith-Spiegel, Koocher and Tabachnick (2006) to name a few, highlight the fact that researchers from different faculties may experience the REC differently, depending on how often their proposed research needed to be reviewed by the REC. In addition to contributing to such scholarly literature, this thesis hopes to benefit the ethics review processes of the studied university, and to contribute to ethics review processes in South Africa in general.

1.2 Preliminary reading and influences

At the onset of this thesis, I consulted many authors (Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009; Bryman, 2012; Whittaker, 2005; Ferrarro, Szigheti, Dawes & Pan, 1999, to name a few) who have written about the development of research ethics regulation. Mollet (2011), for example, highlights that ethical issues are a crucial element in social research. I also consulted literature to understand the development of the ethics regulatory system in various countries [the United States of America (USA), Canada, Australia, United Kingdom (UK) and South Africa, for example]. Drawing from this large body of literature, I describe in detail in Chapter 2 the development of the current research ethics regulatory system employed locally and internationally, thereby placing into context the challenges currently facing RECs and social researchers alike. Also discussed in more detail later in Chapter 2, are critical moments in history that have led to the need to protect research participants from harm. Over time, laws have been put in place in an effort to accord the rights of research participants an important research priority. The development of RECs, however, only dates as far back as the 1960s (Ferraro, Szigeti, Dawes & Pan, 1999).

While searching and reading the literature on research ethics review, it is near impossible to ignore crucial events that led to the globally accepted research ethics review processes. One of

[2] I refer to the respondents to the online questionnaire as social researchers, on the basis of them having applied for ethical clearance from an REC tasked with reviewing social research, and not on the basis of their discipline. These social researchers are therefore affiliated to various faculties, including engineering.

the most important and, possibly, first reasons for strict research ethics regulation can be traced back to atrocities performed by Nazi scientists in the name of science. These ethics "scandals" attracted the attention of academics worldwide. Notorious due to their remarkably horrific nature, these studies were conducted, amongst others, on prisoners who were Jewish, Gypsies, Russian, homosexuals; mentally ill patients; and identical twins. The consequence was that Nazi-employed scientists were put on trial at the Nuremberg Trials, which ultimately led to the development and publication of the Nuremberg Code in 1948 (Van den Hoonaard, 2001; Whittaker, 2005). The Nuremberg Code was the first code to emphasise the importance of informed consent in all research with human participants (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012).

Other well-known examples of controversial research have also contributed to protective research ethics regulation. The Milgram experiments of 1963 demonstrated the capacity of individuals who succumb under authority, to deliberately inflict pain on others in the form of deadly electric shocks (Whittaker, 2005). This deception study raised concerns in the academic community about the psychological trauma experienced by research participants who were deceived into thinking that they were inflicting electric shocks at high voltages on other human beings. This study therefore also illustrates how social research could, in fact, harm participants psychologically. Other examples of controversial and harmful social research are also highlighted in the literature review.

Studies of this nature, in which participants are clearly harmed, played an important role in the World Medical Association's publication of the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964 (Ferraro *et al*., 1999). The Declaration of Helsinki is an important milestone in the history of ethics review, as it introduced the notion of ethics review of research by a central committee (as cited in Ferraro *et al*., 1999). Similarly, the Belmont Report of 1978 established a framework to guide RECs in resolving ethical problems in research with human participants.

It is safe to say that many countries have similar research ethics regulations that have developed from a similar history. An examination of Australia's ethics review system, for example, showed that the country's research ethics framework is in line with international research standards (see Mollet, 2011). Australia implements international ethical standards (such as those stated in the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report). Similar structures developed in Britain and have also been implemented in all research institutions in that country since the 1960s (Ramacharan & Cutcliffe, 2001). As another example, during the mid-seventies in the USA, specific regulations were made effective to protect human subjects (Ferraro *et al*., 1999). In fact, the establishment of the Belmont Report in 1978 was the result of a passage in the USA's National Research Act which led to the establishment of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (Ferraro *et al*., 1999). The legally supported regulatory framework for ethics review is applicable not only in the USA, but in most

parts of Canada, as well as in developing countries, including South Africa (Van den Hoonaard, 2001).

A review of the literature further revealed that, while international research ethics regulation is driven by a need to protect research participants from being harmed during research, there is an equally important view that this approach to research ethics review could have negative consequences for the production of research (and thereby hamper its possible scholarly and societal contributions). For example, Prout (2002) argues that restrictive regulations constraining researchers from researching sensitive topics involving vulnerable research participants (such as abused children, abandoned elderly people, the poor, etc.) limit the development of valuable insights that could have assisted vulnerable research populations. In the literature review, this thesis explores the tension that exists between a need to protect research participants, and the need to advance society through knowledge production by means of research.

I also reviewed previous studies on researchers' experiences with their RECs. These studies provided a useful indication of the type of research that has previously been conducted on RECs and research ethics regulation. (As mentioned above, most countries, including South Africa, have adopted a research ethics review system that regulates research involving human participants, and therefore have similar ethical regulation systems.) Referring to these studies assisted me in understanding what has already been done in this subject area, as well as to ensure that I make a distinctive contribution to this growing body of literature. For example, studies such as those by Ashcraft and Krause (2007), Keith-Spiegel *et al*. (2006), Pritchard (2001), and Rubin and Sieber (2006), to name only a few, assisted me in identifying a need for my particular study on ethics review, and contributed towards the development of my data collection instrument (an online questionnaire). However, the majority of these studies focus mostly on pragmatic, functional issues of research ethics review, while my thesis adds, by the use of a more extensive questionnaire, the dimensions of researchers' scientific domains, preferred research approaches and methodological choices, and ethical positions.

In order to assist me in incorporating the ethical positions of researchers into my understanding of their orientations towards ethics review, I consulted Forsyth's (1980) taxonomy of ethical positions. Forsyth (1980), by drawing on his previous work (Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), suggests that individual variation in moral thinking can, to some extent, be ascribed to two basic factors. The first factor is the degree to which an individual is drawn away from universal moral rules in favour of relativism, i.e. a rejection of the possibility of constructing, or relying on, moral rules when making decisions about moral questions. The second factor influencing variation in moral thinking amongst individuals is the degree of idealism an individual maintains in their own moral thoughts. For example, some individuals may idealistically assume that desirable consequences can always be obtained with the "right" action. Individuals with a less idealistic orientation, however, tend to believe that undesirable consequences will often be interspersed

with desired consequences. Forsyth's taxonomy of ethical ideologies allows the two factors to be dichotomised and on this basis, Forsyth identifies four ethical positions namely: situationism, subjectivism, exceptionism and absolutism. In this thesis, I apply Forsyth's work on moral thinking in general, to the more specific instance of ethical thinking in relation to research. I have therefore adapted Forsyth's definitions of individuals' ethical positions to researchers' research ethics related ones. For example, I describe situationist individuals as researchers that consider the context of each ethically questionable action, such as neglecting to ask research participants to provide informed consent.

It is commonly accepted that the research ethics policies of institutions such as universities are often morally driven or motivated. At the same time, individuals vary in the extent to which they agree with (i.e., are oriented towards) the moral motivations of institutions. Forsyth's taxonomy assisted me in identifying the extent of variation in the ethical positions of researchers at a South African university, and the relationship between their ethical position and orientation towards an REC. As Forsyth's taxonomy was used in the construction of the data collection instrument, it is discussed further in Chapter 3 of this thesis, which focuses on methodological issues.

1.3 Research objectives

The first aim of the research reported in this thesis is to describe social researchers' orientation towards (i.e. perceptions of and level of satisfaction with) the process of institutionalised ethics review of social research by an REC at a South African university. Chapter 2 will review, in more detail, the work of several researchers who also considered the orientations that social researchers may have of an REC. These previous studies informed the development of an online questionnaire which measured the extent to which respondents hold certain perceptions of the REC. To this end, respondents were requested to indicate their level of agreement, on five-point Likert-type scales, with statements expressing various perceptions of the REC.

Another aim of this study is to uncover the extent to which social researchers, who often have limited time to complete their research (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007) make certain research decisions to avoid a lengthy ethics review process. This study focuses, in particular, on the decision to avoid (and/or advising postgraduate students to avoid) "sensitive" research topics (particularly research on minors), and to change a research design in order to avoid perceived difficulties during the ethics review process. The extent to which taking these research decisions depend on researchers' scientific domain and preferred methodology is also investigated.

Informal conversations with social science researchers at the studied university, as well as previous studies such as Van den Hoonaard's (2006), suggest that researchers tend to avoid researching sensitive topics. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the REC would

more closely review a research proposal that would involve vulnerable research participants, for example. Van den Hoonaard's (2006) study further highlights that a decline in certain social science methods would also decrease potentially important contributions to a study discipline. It is for this reason that I am interested in studying these ethics-related research decisions of researchers.

This research also aims to explore how social researchers' orientations towards an REC may differ according to those researchers' scientific domain, the methodological approach(es) they tend to follow, and their ethical position. As the literature review will show, many authors raise the concern that applying ethics principles suited to quantitative biomedical research is problematic. It will also show that researchers working predominantly in the social sciences and humanities have been especially critical of research ethics review, and it is therefore hypothesised that those researchers would have the most negative orientations towards the REC. With regard to methodological preference, a review of the literature, as well as informal conversations with researchers, indicate that qualitative researchers in general are more likely to have a negative orientation towards the REC, which is another hypothesis I will test empirically. I further argue, also on the basis of the literature review, that an REC is formed on the basis of certain ethical principles, and one could, therefore, reasonably expect researchers with ethical positions different from those underlying an REC to have more negative orientations towards that REC. Thus, it is hypothesised that social researchers with a relativistic stance on ethics (especially situationists) would have the most negative orientations towards the REC.

1.4 Research methodology

To meet my research aims, I needed a broad description of a relatively large population, and to correlate variables – needs which were best fulfilled by means of a quantitative survey. This design also allows for the replication of this study by future researchers who wish to conduct a similar study at another university.

A structured, self-administered questionnaire designed specifically for the study was administered online, using SU's online survey software, Checkbox. A pilot study was conducted with various postgraduate students as well as academics employed at SU. Thereafter, an email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the whole population of potential respondents, i.e. academic researchers who in the five years before the commencement of my data collection, submitted their own applications and/or the applications of their postgraduate students to the humanities REC for ethics review. The email requested informed consent from potential respondents, and provided them with a link to the questionnaire.

In order to analyse the data by means of a variety of descriptive and other methods, I made use of the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (IBM SPSS) Statistics versions 22, 23

and 24. I also made use of the services of SU's Centre for Statistical Consultation for assistance with the statistical analysis of my data. Both the South African university where this study was conducted, as well as the respondents will remain anonymous in this thesis.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature on research ethics, and a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to social researchers' experiences with ethics review. Chapter 2 further provides a historical background on research ethics and, in the process, highlights the significance of the ethics principles embedded in the research ethics review process.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology employed for this study. An introduction to the research setting is provided, followed by the choice of research strategy (quantitative) and design (cross-sectional survey). I also included in this chapter the extensive ethical considerations that played a fairly large role in the research design of this thesis.

Chapter 4 reports the results of analysis of the data obtained from the online survey, in order to meet the research aims of this study. Chapter 5 interprets the results presented in Chapter 4, while also providing a conclusion of the thesis as a whole. As such, the chapter discusses the extent to which the study has met the stated research aims, and also makes recommendations for further research on this topic.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of the literature pertaining to research ethics and its review. I will consider key moments in history that have helped shape how governments and research institutions (such as universities) review the ethics of research. In addition to giving an overview of research ethics, I will also consider the development of research ethics regulation around the world. There have been key moments in history which gave rise to the development of research ethics regulations, and which have been chronicled by multiple authors [see, for example, Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009); Bryman (2012); Whittaker (2005); Ferraro, Szigeti, Dawes and Pan (1999); and Mullet (2011), to name a few].

Research ethics review systems vary across the world, with the most significant differences existing between developed and developing parts of the world. However, countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, UK and South Africa developed rather similar ethics regulatory systems, which have also been described by many authors [see, for example, Schüklenk and Ashcroft (2000); De Vries, DeBruin and Goodgame (2004); Strode, Grant, Slack and Mushariwa (2005); Edwards, Viehbeck, Hämäläinen, Rus, Skovgaard, Van de Goor, Valente, Syed and Aro (2012); Wassenaar and Mamotte (2012); and Horn (2013)]. Drawing from this large body of literature, this chapter will delineate the development of the research ethics review systems that are currently employed around the globe. This will put into context some of the challenges that South African RECs and social researchers are currently facing. This literature review will further demonstrate that research ethics review is deeply embedded in the research practices of both the natural and social sciences, but also that some key criticisms are commonly levelled at RECs.

The ultimate goal of this chapter is to illustrate the contribution of this particular study to a growing body of literature on the ethics review of social science research. This will be achieved through the discussion of previous studies that focused on this topic, and in particular by highlighting the findings of previous studies of researchers' key perceptions of, and experiences with, RECs. The last section of this chapter will discuss the theoretical framework applied in this thesis, i.e. Forsyth's Ethics Position Theory, which allowed me to explore researchers' ethical positions and relate these to their orientation towards the relevant REC.

2.2 The foundations of ethics review: a historical overview

This section will provide an overview of historical events that have shaped the oversight of research ethics. Because of numerous unethical studies in the past, governments and research

institutions needed to work towards drafting codes and/or regulations that would ensure that research participants are not harmed due to participation in research. Thanks to these codes and regulations, the rights of research participants became an increasingly important research priority.

2.2.1 Informed consent and the Nuremberg code

One of the most important aspects of research ethics review is the requirement to obtain informed consent from research participants. Obtaining informed consent from research participants implies that they grant their permission to participate in a study. It also implies that they understand the nature of the research, as well as what their participation will involve (Israel, 2015). While the importance of informed consent has been increasingly emphasised in recent years, obtaining it from research participants was not always mandated. Much of the increased awareness of the importance of informed consent can be attributed to unethical research practices such as those of Nazi scientists during World War II, who forced individuals to participate in harmful (and sometimes fatal) biomedical research. Notorious due to their remarkably horrific nature, these studies were usually conducted, amongst others, on prisoners who were Jewish, Gypsies, Russian, homosexuals, mentally ill or identical twins. In the aftermath of World War II, Nazi-employed scientists were put on trial at the Nuremberg Trials (Ferraro, Szigeti, Dawes & Pan, 1999; Schüklenk & Ashcroft, 2000).

As described by Johnston (2006), children have also fallen victim to harmful research practices. Sadly, children have often been participants in harmful research and have not always been protected by legislation. One frequently cited example is a study conducted on children in Boston in 1896, which involved performing, without any consent, lumbar punctures tests on children who had been hospitalised. In another example, in 1900, infants at the Hebrew Infant Asylum in New York were used in a vaccine test which involved withholding orange juice until the infants developed scurvy. It is due to studies of this nature that researchers today who wish to conduct research on children or other vulnerable groups have to adhere to strict research ethics regulations.

These research ethics scandals attracted the attention of academics worldwide. What followed was the development and publication of the Nuremberg Code in 1948 (as cited in Van den Hoonaard, 2001; Whittaker, 2005). With good reason, and according to Israel (2015:29), the Code reflects a fear of the public losing their trust in medical doctors and researchers. The Nuremberg Code was the first code that emphasised the importance of informed consent in all research involving human participants (Wassenaar & Mamotte, 2012; Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001; Van den Hoonaard, 2001).

After the formulation of the Nuremberg code, other examples of controversial research further contributed to the development of protective research ethics regulation. One such study involved the Milgram experiments of 1963, which investigated destructive obedience in a laboratory.

Research participants were assigned the role of “teachers”, who were instructed by an authority figure (the researcher) to give an increasingly severe electric shock to “students” (an accomplice) each time an incorrect answer was given. The severity of the shocks was indicated to the “teacher” as ranging from “slight shock” to “danger: severe shock” (Milgram, 1963:373).

According to Milgram (1963), two out of three of the research participants inflicted the highest possible voltage on the “student”. This demonstrated the capacity of individuals succumbing to the influence of authority to deliberately inflict pain on others in the form of “deadly” electric shocks (Whittaker, 2005). Milgram (1963:377) recorded research participants showing signs of emotional distress during the experiment. He stated the following about one of the participants:

> I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within 20 minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly approaching a point of nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his earlobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered: “Oh God, let’s stop it”. And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end.

Milgram’s study raised concerns in the academic community about the psychological trauma experienced by research participants who were led to believe that they were inflicting electric shocks at high voltages on other human beings. The study also illustrated how research could harm participants psychologically.

2.2.3 The birth of the REC: the Declaration of Helsinki

In reaction to cases of biomedical and psychological research in which participants were undeniably harmed, the World Medical Association developed and published the Declaration of Helsinki in 1964 (Ferraro *et al*., 1999). It was formulated to address ethical issues in biomedical research, as it is a “statement of ethical principles to provide guidance to physicians and other participants in medical research on identifiable human material or identifiable data”. It is regarded as an important milestone in the history of ethics review, as it established the ethics review of biomedical research by means of RECs (Ferraro *et al*., 1999).

The Declaration of Helsinki also helped regulate the participation of children in research, and has since its drafting been adhered to by many countries. According to the document, a child’s parent or legal guardian should provide informed consent on behalf of the child. In addition, children should also give their assent as an indication of their willingness to participate in a particular study. Child research participants are further protected by the stipulation that failure on their part to indicate dissent cannot be regarded as assent or willingness to participate in research (as cited in Johnston, 2006).

In later years, after the formulation of the Declaration of Helsinki, the details of a biomedical study that had been conducted over decades became known to the public. This study is known as the Tuskegee Syphilis experiments, which were conducted between 1932 and 1972

(Whittaker, 2005). During these experiments, 400 underprivileged African American males took part in the study without their informed consent. The men were neither informed that they had syphilis, nor were they given the cure when a treatment for the disease was found in 1947.

One also finds examples of unethical research practices in studies commissioned by governments. In the 1950s to the 1970s in the USA and Canada, experiments were conducted that involved the covert administration of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) to prisoners and military personnel, with the intention of developing methods of mind control and manipulation (Van den Hoonaard, 2000; Whittaker, 2005). Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study were harmed and their informed consent not obtained.

2.2.4 The Belmont Report and the inception of research ethics review of social science research

The examples of unethical research thus far discussed fall within the biomedical sciences. Another well-known, controversial study that is often cited, comprises social science research that was conducted by Humphreys in the late 1960s (as cited in Haggerty, 2004; Whittaker, 2005; and Bryman, 2012). Humphreys (1970) conducted a participant-observation study of the homosexual encounters of men in public toilets (also known as the “tearoom trade”). In order to gain information, Humphreys gave men the impression that he would act as their “watch queen”. During these encounters, Humphreys (1970) recorded the number-plate details of their cars, in order to track down their home addresses. A year after his observations, Humphreys contacted these men and interviewed them – this time disguised as someone else, thereby preventing being recognised by the men he had observed the year before. This study has gained infamy for being widely regarded as violating the privacy of study subjects, by publishing detailed information about their homosexual lifestyles without their consent.

The preceding sections provided examples of research studies that harmed research participants. As these and other unethical research practices continued, more efforts were made to prevent research participants from being harmed. After a public outcry over harmful research conducted on people without their consent, the USA government launched the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research in 1974, to examine issues concerning the protection of human subjects. This commission became responsible for identifying research ethics principles that could form the basis of both biomedical and social science research involving human participants. What resulted from this effort was the Belmont Report. Drafted and published in 1978, is essentially an effort to summarise the basic research ethics principles identified by the commission. Today, the guidelines for ethics review in the Belmont Report are mandated not only in the USA, but in most parts of the developed and developing world, e.g. Canada, Australia, Britain, South Africa, Nigeria, and India, to name a few (Van den Hoonaard, 2001; Cleaton-Jones & Wassenaar, 2010).

Similar to the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report established a framework to guide research institutions towards resolving ethical problems that arise in research with human participants. It is important to note that, unlike the Nuremberg Code and the Declaration of Helsinki, the Belmont Report stipulates the importance of ethics review of biomedical as well as social science research. This is why today, in most countries, research conducted at universities require ethical clearance from RECs, and this requirement applies to the social sciences as well.

The Belmont Report provides researchers and institutions with principles that serve as guidelines to ensure the protection of research participants (Shore, 2006; Ferraro *et al*., 1999). These principles, namely, “respect for persons”, “beneficence”, “honesty” and “justice”, are meant to assist researchers in making ethical research decisions. They are also meant to serve as guidelines according to which RECs make decisions about the ethics of a proposed study.

The application of the principles provided by the Belmont Report is better understood when their definitions are examined more closely. As described in Kruger, Ndebele and Horn (2014:1), beneficence refers to the duty of the researcher to do good, and not to harm research participants. “Justice”, on the other hand, refers to the Report’s requirement for RECs to weigh the benefits of a study up against the possible harm that could come to potential research participants and/or society. This process is referred to as a “cost–benefit analysis” or a “risk–benefit analysis”. Respect for persons, within the research ethics review context, concerns the autonomy of research participants. This means that research participants have the right to decide whether they want to participate in research. In addition to providing these principles, the Belmont Report stipulates that, in order for researchers to be granted ethical clearance from RECs, they need to explain the methods they will use to obtain informed consent from research participants before their research commences.

The research ethics principles discussed above form the basis of research ethics regulation in countries all over the world. As the following section will show, the Belmont Report has had a far-reaching impact on the research ethics regulatory systems of both developed and developing countries, where RECs are often required to make use of its principles to guide their decision making during the research ethics review of proposed research.

2.2.5 An African and South African perspective

As mentioned above, unethical research studies have led to an increased focus on research ethics. The Nuremberg code, the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report were drafted and developed with considerable focus on the well-being of research participants. These ethics codes form the basis of research ethics review and/or regulation in many countries across the world, and therefore research ethics policies are often also drafted with emphasis placed on the protection of research participants.

Over time, there has been an increase in the pressure exerted by these guidelines on researchers to apply for ethical clearance for their research projects from a registered REC at their institution (Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, 2001, cited in Malouff & Schutte, 2005:57). The role of RECs therefore has become more powerful over the years, and, as phrased by Malouff and Schutte (2005:557), they have become the "gatekeepers of human research". The human-medical research guidelines were later applied to social research – a contested phenomenon discussed in later sections of this literature review. The purpose of this section, however, is to briefly describe ethics review from an African and South African perspective, and to show that ethics regulations in these countries have developed along quite similar historical trajectories than in developed countries.

Nevertheless, it needs to be recognised that research ethics is a significant problem in research conducted in developing parts of the world (Emanuel, Wendler, Killen & Grady, 2004; Tsoka-Gwegweni & Wassenaar, 2014). Africa is a large continent with diverse research contexts, and it is not surprising that it also has some unique contingencies with regard to research ethics review systems. The historical narrative of African research ethics review includes the dire need, and opportunities, for increased health research on the continent, due to the presence of many deadly diseases. Consequently, researchers from developed countries, especially from the USA and UK, flocked to the continent to conduct research, and still do so. Unfortunately, a growing number of health researchers active on the continent probably conducted their research in the absence of well-established research ethics review systems (Kruger *et al*., 2014:3).

This led to an increased concern that vulnerable African populations were being exploited for research purposes, especially because the quite often poor and/or uneducated research participants in Africa are unable to distinguish between medical/social care and research – what Kruger *et al*. (2014:77) refer to as "therapeutic misconception". These concerns were further exacerbated by multiple cases coming to the light of uninformed research participants indeed being exploited. The examples that validate these concerns show that Africa has its own archive of unethical-research stories to tell.

During the early 1990s, a British anaesthetist, Dr Richard Gladwell McGown, conducted medical experiments on 500 African patients in Zimbabwe. Six patients died during these experiments, which were conducted without the approval of a research ethics review body, and also without the knowledge of the patients. Dr McGown was later found guilty of professional negligence. A similar tragedy unfolded in Nigeria in 2001, where a clinical trial, commissioned by the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, tested an antibiotic in the hope of developing improved treatment for meningitis. Eleven children died, and many others suffered long-term, permanent brain damage as a result of their participation. Consequently, Pfizer was sued by 30 Nigerian families in 2001 (Kruger *et al*., 2014:4). It has also been suggested that many other examples of harmful research conducted on the African continent exist, but have gone unreported (Kruger *et*

al. 2014:5). These unethical research practices in Africa help to describe the context of the need for the development of more robust research ethics review and regulations in African countries.

A few African countries have, to varying degrees, modelled their research ethics review regulations on that of developed countries such as the USA and Britain. Kruger *et al*. (2014:6) provide a few examples of this, by referring to the research ethics review structures of Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Similar to many developed countries' research ethics history, biomedical research councils were the first research ethics oversight bodies established in Africa. South Africa and Zimbabwe established medical research councils in the years 1969 and 1974, respectively, which fulfilled a supervisory role in reviewing the ethics of health research. Similarly, Kenya established the Kenya Medical Institute in 1979.

The first documented cases of research ethics review in Africa were recorded in South Africa. The country's earliest REC was established in 1966, when the University of the Witwatersrand established a Health REC. Over the last three decades, most tertiary institutions in SA have established RECs (Kruger *et al*., 2014:5). In total, there are currently approximately 45 South African RECs, including two private, non-academic institutions (Kruger *et al*., 2014:6). In addition, the South African Ministry of Health has incorporated research ethics into the national legal framework.

As recently as 2005 there was no South African law regulating the rights of research participants. The National Health Act was South Africa's first attempt to legally protect research participants, including children (Strode, Slack, Wassenaar & Singh, 2007). Similar to other countries, South Africa has established research ethics review systems and legislation based on those implemented in the USA and other developed countries. Pressure from international research sponsors that fund only ethically reviewed research projects has also contributed significantly to an increase in standardised research ethics review of research proposals. Consequently, South Africa gradually established a highly regulated and widely implemented research ethics review system. South Africa's National Health Research Ethics Council (NHREC), operated under the Department of Health (DoH) along with the Medicines Control Council (MCC), is a legislative authority that can be compared to similar structures in the USA (Cleaton-Jones & Wassenaar, 2010).

The purpose of Section 2.2 was to briefly describe the history of research ethics globally, by revisiting key moments in history that have led to the ethics review of research, such as the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki and the Belmont Report, and to conduct a closer examination of the research ethics review related contingencies of African countries. The following section will discuss the results of empirical research of researchers' perceptions of, and experiences with, research ethics review, as reported in the literature.

2.3 Researchers' perceptions, experiences and critique of research ethics review by an REC

The examples of unethical research discussed in the previous section should provide ample justification for the ethics review of both biomedical and social science research. Furthermore, evidence of the continuing prevalence of unethical conduct amongst researchers may be found on the website of The Office for Research Integrity in the USA, which contains a list of researchers who have been found guilty of research misconduct, and which is updated on a monthly basis, along with other accounts of frequently occurring unethical research practices. Authors such as Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009), Hunter (2013), Keith-Spiegel *et al*. (2006) and Kruger *et al*. (2014) have also highlighted that past atrocities, together with recent research scandals, are more than sufficient motivation for putting in place rigorous research ethics review systems that ensure research participants' protection from exploitation. However, research ethics review of social science research is not always met with enthusiasm. In fact, many researchers have lamented about the challenges research ethics review poses to their study disciplines. This section will summarise social science researchers' perceptions, experiences and criticisms of research ethics review by RECs.

2.3.1 The importance of understanding researchers' perceptions

Ethics review of research involving humans relies on the trust in researchers to offer their research for review, as well as trust in researchers to adhere, during the process of their research, to requirements RECs set for them (McNeill, Berglund & Webster, 1992). Based on their study of whether Australian researchers accept their REC and whether they conduct ethical research, McNeill *et al*. (1992:317) further state that this trust in researchers can "only be justified if researchers accepted the review process".

Similarly, Liddle and Brazelton (1996) discuss the compliance of researchers with their RECs. These researchers (1996) sought to determine whether the level of satisfaction researchers have with an REC relates to their compliance with the relevant REC. Liddle and Brazelton found that researcher satisfaction with REC functioning appeared to be an important factor in compliance with REC procedures. They report that the majority of those researchers who indicated moderate to extreme dissatisfaction with their REC's functioning also indicated that they were not complying with the guidelines of their REC.

On the other hand, non-acceptance of research ethics review processes causes frustrations for RECs tasked with reviewing proposed research. These frustrations of RECs, specifically with social science researchers, are mentioned by Liddle and Brazelton (1996). Often RECs are frustrated with social science researchers submitting unclear, hastily prepared applications for ethical clearance. In addition to RECs' frustration with social researchers' non-acceptance of

ethics guidelines, difference of opinion between researchers and RECs could lead to conflict between them (Schreier & Stadler, 1992; Liddle & Brazelton, 1996).

Keith-Spiegel *et al*. (2006) draw attention to the perceived vulnerability of RECs. They mention that the hostility researchers have towards RECs may be unfair. This vulnerability of RECs is understood when considering the fact that RECs are regarded as perceived obstacles to researchers who in turn, are dependent on their own research productivity to define their professional identities. While the REC may seem vulnerable in that regard, RECs have become increasingly more powerful over the years and as worded by Malouff and Schutte (2005:557), they became the "gatekeepers of human research".

2.3.2 The positive view

Keith-Spiegel, Koocher and Tabachnick (2006) are of the view that not all researchers are dissatisfied with the competence, procedures and policies of their RECs. Drawing on literature from organisational studies, Keith-Spiegel *et al*. (2006) refer to the concept "procedural justice", which occurs when decisions in organisations are based on clear policies that are applied evenly and without bias. If these criteria are met, individuals will typically not be hostile towards an organisation, nor are individuals inclined to hold others responsible for failing. Keith-Spiegel *et al*. (2006) found that researchers tend to evaluate the performance of their REC based on their perception of their REC's fairness. This, along with several comments made by respondents in that study, strongly suggests that researchers' perception of REC fairness play a large role in the decision of some researchers to disobey research ethics policies and laws.

Many studies have investigated the actual experiences of researchers with an REC (e.g. McNeill, Berglund & Webster, 1992; Liddle & Brazelton, 1996; Ferraro *et al*., 1999; Ashcraft & Krause, 2007; and Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009). In all of these studies, the majority of researchers reported being satisfied with their experiences with the relevant REC. In Australia, for example, McNeil *et al*. (1992) found that nearly 80 per cent of researchers thought that REC decisions were "sound". In a study conducted in the USA, Ferraro *et al*. (1999) found that the majority of researchers found the overall services of the REC to be satisfactory. Similarly, in another study in that country, Ashcraft and Krause (2007) found the majority of researchers were satisfied with the REC. In South Africa, Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) conducted a study on the experiences of social scientists with their REC – the first of its kind in the country. Similar to previous studies mentioned above, the majority of social scientists who responded to that study reported having generally positive experiences with their REC.

2.3.3 Points of critique

Although previous studies have shown that researchers are generally satisfied with an REC, many researchers have also indicated their dissatisfaction with an REC. In this section, I distinguish

between practical and principled criticisms that researchers, and in some cases ethics scholars, tend to level against RECs. This distinction is similar to the one drawn by Wassenaar (2006) and later, Wassenaar & Mamotte (2012).

2.3.3.1 Critique concerning practical issues

Points of critique that will be considered in this section are those that concern the practical aspects of research ethics review, such as the timeliness of REC reviews of research protocols, the perceived role of the REC and whether this role is defined fairly.

McNeil *et al*. (1992) report that a few researchers expressed their discontent with the time-consuming nature of the review process, something that is understandably not very welcomed by researchers with deadlines. Based on their findings, McNeil *et al*. (1992) recommend that RECs take a more active role in monitoring research ethics reviews that are in progress. Another study revealed that some researchers felt that their REC has not treated them fairly and equitably (Ferraro *et al*. 1999:278), because the ethics review process took too long; the relevant REC asked for unreasonable changes; bureaucratic procedures were excessive; and the REC went beyond the protection of participants and interfered with research and design. In contrast, a study by Ashcraft and Krause (2007:8) showed that 62% of researchers believed the time it took their REC to provide feedback on their research protocol was reasonable. Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) found that South African researchers have issues with their RECs similar to those researchers from developed countries have: the fact that RECs tend to have slow turnaround time and problematic forms and procedures.

RECs are also criticised by researchers for acting unfairly, by recommending changes to research protocols that are perceived to be beyond the scope of the RECs' authority, and an impediment to social science research. Haggerty (2004:394) uses the concept "ethics creep" to refer the intensification of research ethics regulation by the addition of REC procedures which are viewed as beyond the scope of research ethics review. He defines the term as "a dual process whereby the regulatory structure of the ethics bureaucracy is expanding outward, colonizing new groups, practices, and institutions, while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit". Previous studies (Liddle & Brazelton, 1996; Van den Hoonaard, 2001; Haggerty, 2004; Van den Hoonaard 2006; Mamotte &Wassenaar, 2009, to name a few) have indeed found that often, RECs are accused of interfering with the research process beyond the point of research ethics review.

Ethics creep in research ethics review seems to be facilitated by the increased bureaucratisation of research ethics review. This worldwide trend often leads to a system clouded by organisational hurdles that need to be overcome by university staff, members of RECs and researchers (van den Hoonaard, 2011). Also important in relation to ethics creep is that ethical research conduct has become almost indistinguishable from sound research methodology. Authors such as Hunter (2013), Horn (2013), Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009), Keith-Spiegel *et*

al. (2006) and Malouff and Schutte (2005) highlight the importance of research ethics review in ensuring that methodologically and ethically sound research is conducted. These authors further highlight how RECs have prevented poorly designed, and therefore potentially harmful studies, from occurring.

Linked to the criticism that RECs put in place procedures that are perceived as problematic, in the sense of involving an overstepping of RECs' boundaries, is the issue that research ethics review may impede the advancement of social science research. It is therefore important to consider examples of "problematic" research ethics regulation and the possible effects thereof on the social sciences, but also examples of research decisions taken by social scientists in an attempt to avoid what they perceive to be obstacles posed by the ethics review system.

An interesting example of the potential effect of research ethics regulation on social science research is found in South Africa. On 1 March 2012, Section 71 of the National Health Act (NHA) was operationalised by the Minister of Health to implement the requirement that all non-therapeutic research conducted on children would have to be approved by him. The Ministry's rationale for placing such strict regulations on all such research was not made clear. It was also critiqued by scholars as a rigid legal framework, and as contradictory to what is stated in Section 10 of the South African Children's Act, i.e. that children of the appropriate age, maturity and developmental level have the right to participate in matters that concern that child and that children's viewpoints on such issues should be given consideration (Strode, Slack & Essack, 2010; Strode, Slack, Wassenaar & Singh, 2007; Strode, Grant, Slack & Mushariwa, 2005). Social science researchers conducting research involving children, or other vulnerable research populations, would therefore be faced with regulations that not only restrict them because of their rigidity, but which are also confusing.

While an amendment to Section 71(3) in the National Health Act in September 2014 delegated the authority to grant clearance for non-therapeutic research on minors to appropriate bodies, including university RECs (Republic of South Africa, 2014), the NHA's strict research regulatory framework might have had serious implications for the production of knowledge generated from non-therapeutic research on children. One could reasonably assume that onerous bureaucratic requirements (legal or institutional) could have considerable effects on the production of knowledge through social research. As Bryman (2012:145) illustrates with reference to student researchers, a "lengthy and problematic system of gaining ethical approval" can be "very off-putting", and that some supervisors advise their students not to conduct research for which the ethics approval process is lengthy and problematic, unless they have submitted an application for approval "several months previously". Prout (2002) mentions that restrictive regulations that constrain the participation of children in research contribute towards the risk of valuable insights (from a child's perspective, and therefore on novel aspects of the social situations, settings and issues of children) being lost.

Another example of how ethics review and regulation may be problematic is provided by Van den Hoonard's (2006) study of Canadian sociology master's theses completed between 1995 and 2004. As Van den Hoonaard (2006:78) mentions, ethics review of research involving humans was institutionalised in Canada only as recently as January 2001. By observing trends in the research conducted for the master's theses before and after this date, Van den Hoonaard was able to offer empirical insights on the effects of institutionalised ethics review on sociological research.

Although the number of sociology master's theses produced in Canada increased considerably from 1995 to 2004, there was a decline in the number of theses that involved fieldwork with research participants. This suggests that master's students increasingly avoided research that involves human participation, a trend that seems to be linked to the institutionalisation of ethics review of research involving humans. Because sociology as a discipline relies heavily on fieldwork for new contributions, the field's theoretical basis would be negatively affected by this decline (Van den Hoonaard, 2006:81).

In addition to this indirect evidence of a tendency among researchers to avoid studies for which obtaining ethical clearance may prove difficult, social science researchers have also reported avoiding an REC by making certain deviant research decisions. In Liddle and Brazelton's (1996) study, 21 per cent of respondents reported that they had made minor changes to a study without receiving approval from the relevant REC. Also important to note, is that 14 per cent of respondents reported collecting data prior to receiving ethical clearance from the relevant REC. Ashcraft and Krause (2007:14) produced similar results: 48 per cent of researchers in their study reported to have contravened REC rules (e.g. by collecting data before REC approval). They also found that time limitations most commonly motivated respondents to defy REC policies and procedures. Ashcraft and Krause (2007) therefore cautioned that the need of RECs to enforce strict ethics regulations in an attempt to protect research participants may actually lead to researchers disobeying those regulations.

What this section has shown, was that researchers have levelled practical criticisms against research ethics review, because of time constraints and the additional bureaucratic hurdles experienced by those interested in researching vulnerable research groups. Time constraints and red tape can lead to researchers avoiding certain topics and/or methods in order to avoid a lengthy research ethics review process, as was shown in Van den Hoonaard's (2006) study in Canada. This thesis will investigate this important phenomenon in a South African context, by analysing its prevalence across methodological approaches and scientific domains.

2.3.3.2 Critique concerning issues of principle

In earlier sections of this literature review, I showed that instances of unethical research have in the past prompted the formulation of a number of research ethics codes and, in some cases, regulations. Also mentioned previously, was that the first research ethics codes that strongly influenced research ethics regulation, such as the Nuremberg Code (1948), the Declaration of

Helsinki (1964) and the Belmont Report, were developed in order to address ethical issues in biomedical research. RECs were therefore initially conceptualised and mandated as a requirement of the research processes of biomedical research, and it was only with the inception of the Belmont Report that research ethics review became applicable to social science research.

While some authors have supported the idea that all research needs to be reviewed according to the principles put forward by the Belmont Report (e.g. Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009; Hunter, 2013; Horn, 2013), many ethics scholars (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2001; De Vries & DeBruin, 2004; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Haggerty, 2004; Hemmings, 2006; Van den Hoonaard, 2006, to name a few) have raised the concern that the ethics review of social science research with the aid of biomedical research principles (those principles provided by the Belmont Report) is problematic. These principles are best suited to research that is deductive, which poses challenges for the majority of social science research that is inductive (Van den Hoonaard, 2001). Furthermore, the requirement for informed consent, which is included in most research ethics regulations, is foreign to certain social science research practices. This is due to the fact that the social sciences often involve explorative data collection that requires participants to be unaware that they are being observed (such as participant observation and explorative interviews) (Van den Hoonaard, 2006). Consent forms in particular tend to counteract the desired informal nature of ethnographic research situations (Haggerty, 2004), and may change the tone of research encounters from explorative to rigid and formal.

Research has shown that social researchers who apply for ethics clearance tend to agree that the research ethics review system imposes biomedical research principles on social science research. For example, the most fundamental criticism of the ethics review process expressed by respondents in Malouff and Schutte's (2005:61) study is that it is appropriate for medical research, but not psychological research.

Another principled criticism of the research ethics review is that it constitutes a form of moral panic. Cohen (1972:9, cited in Van den Hoonaard, 2001) defines moral panic as a "threat to societal values and interests". Van den Hoonaard states that moral panic is a reaction to past atrocities committed by researchers, and is accompanied by an exaggeration of harm and risk. Haggerty (2004) points out that RECs tend to exaggerate the risks of proposed research and place constraints on research they deem risky. This he considers problematic, given that the extent to which RECs can constrain potential research is not limited in any way. Haggerty also highlights the desire of RECs to appear consistent and to follow rules, which leads him to warn against "rule fetishization" by RECs, as this can lead to researchers avoiding certain types of research, due to the perceived difficulty in gaining ethical clearance from RECs for such research [see for example, Van den Hoonaard's (2006) study discussed in sections above].

2.4. Conceptual framework

It is commonly accepted that the research ethics policies of institutions such as universities are often morally driven or motivated. At the same time, individuals vary in the extent to which they agree with the moral motivations of institutions. I therefore decided to use a taxonomy of ethical positions suggested by Forsyth (1980) to identify the extent of variation in the ethical positions of employees of the studied university, as a South African higher education institution, and in determining the relationship (if any) between ethical position and orientation towards an REC.

Drawing on his previous work (Schlenker & Forsyth, 1977), Forsyth (1980) suggests that individual variation in moral thinking can to some extent be ascribed to two basic factors. The first is the degree to which an individual is drawn away from universal moral rules in favour of relativism, i.e. a rejection of the possibility of constructing or relying on universal moral rules when making decisions about moral questions. The second factor influencing variation in the moral thinking amongst individuals is the degree of idealism they maintain in their own moral thoughts. For example, some individuals may idealistically assume that desirable consequences can always be obtained with the "right" action. Individuals with a less idealistic orientation, however, tend to believe that undesirable consequences will often be intermixed with desired consequences.

Forsyth's taxonomy of ethical ideologies dichotomises the two factors (idealism and relativism), and the dichotomy yields a two-by-two classification of ethical ideologies, represented in Table 1.

Table 1: *Taxonomy of ethical ideologies (Forsyth, 1980)*

		Relativism	
		High	*Low*
Idealism	*High*	Situationists Rejects moral rules; advocates individualistic analysis of each act in a situation; relativistic.	Absolutists Assumes the best possible outcome can always be achieved by following universal moral rules
	Low	Subjectivists Appraisals based on personal values rather than universal moral principles; relativistic.	Exceptionists Moral absolutes guide judgements but pragmatically open to exceptions to these standards; utilitarian.

Forsyth (1980) developed an Ethics Position Questionnaire (EPQ) with the intention of measuring these differences in ethical thought, because of his interest in people's different reactions to the controversial Milgram's (1963) study on obedience to authority (Forsyth, 2011). The questionnaire enables a researcher to categorise respondents based on their general dispositions to morally

charged situations that require them to make certain judgments, and may therefore be assumed to also measure researchers' ethical positions. The questionnaire includes two scales: one measures the extent to which an individual is idealistic in their moral thinking, while the other measures the extent to which an individual is relativistic when making judgments. Simply put, the EPQ is based on the assumption that a respondent's degree of idealism and relativism determines his/her ethical ideology, and therefore his/her ethical position.

The EPQ allows one to categorise respondents as holding one of four distinct ethical positions: absolutists, exceptionists, situationists or subjectivists. Forsyth (1980:176) states that this can be better understood by comparing each category to a specific school of thought in the philosophy of ethics. He compares the high-relativism groups (situationists and subjectivists) to individuals supporting an ideology of ethical scepticism, i.e. the belief that there are different ways of viewing morality, or (when applied to my research) different was of viewing what constitute ethical research practices, such as requesting informed consent. Forsyth's (1980) typology further indicates that high-relativism groups may exhibit either low or high levels of idealism.

The subjectivist position is likened to ethical egoism – a pragmatic approach to evaluating moral action, based on the belief that no moral standards are valid except in reference to one's own behaviour, and that moral action should depend on personal perspectives. Applied to my study, it would be the ethical position of a researcher who advocates for ethics-related judgments to be made based on his or her own, personal values.

Situationists, Forsyth (1980) explains, can be understood through Fletcher's (1966) situation ethics, which is supportive of the idea that morality is centred on a contextual appropriateness. Thus, as in the case with subjectivists, situationists also do not rely on absolute moral principles, but examine each situation (or what may be construed as morally questionable or unethical action) differently, taking into consideration its context.

The low-relativism groups are the absolutists and the exceptionists. Forsyth (1980) compares the ethical ideology of absolutists to deontological moral philosophy. A well-known deontological philosopher, Immanuel Kant, argued that moral principles do not allow for any exceptions. Importantly, Forsyth (1980) notes that individuals rarely adopt a purely deontological moral philosophy, but that absolutism is the ethical position associated most strongly with a deontological philosophy, as it involves an emphasis on maintaining consistency with moral principles, and a reliance on universal moral judgments, to guide actions. To illustrate in relation to this study, an absolutist social researcher would without exception advocate research that poses no harm to research participants, regardless of the benefits to a broader population, or insights, such research may provide.

The last ethical position in Forsyth's taxonomy is the exceptionist position which is similar to absolutism, in that it involves strong reliance on universal moral rules to decide whether a research practice is ethical. Unlike absolutism, however, exceptionism advocates that exceptions

need to be made to universal ethical codes in some contexts, because the morality of an action depends on the consequences produced by it. According to Forsyth (1980), it can therefore be compared to a teleological moral philosophy. In particular, the exceptionist position follows a utilitarian approach to what is moral, i.e. that an action is moral if it produces "good" consequences, and therefore supports the notion of "the greatest good for the greatest number".

Forsyth's (1980) classification of ethical ideologies was used as a basis for the development of Ethics Position Theory (EPT) by Forsyth, O'Boyle and McDaniel (2008) in an international empirical study on cultural variations of idealism and relativism. Forsyth *et al*. (2008) found that ethical positions across regions vary in predictable ways. They concluded that Western countries are characterised by ethical positions (commonly exceptionism) that are different from those of Eastern countries (commonly subjectivism and situationism) and Middle-Eastern countries (commonly absolutism and situationism).

I will be applying an adaptation of Forsyth's (1980) EPQ in a different manner, i.e. to determine whether there is, as I anticipate, a noteworthy association between the ethical positions of social researchers at a South African university and their orientations towards the REC that reviews their applications for ethics review. In particular, I expect researchers who tend towards situationist and subjectivist positions to have the most negative orientations towards the REC. The reasoning underlying this expectation is as follows:

The REC on which my study focuses takes into consideration ethical principles mandated by the National Health Act, while considering each application for ethical clearance on a case-by-case basis. The REC as an institution is therefore, arguably, most closely aligned with an exceptionist position, which follows an approach to ethics that is contrary to that followed by situationists and subjectivists. This is particularly relevant with regard to social research: as was discussed in more detail earlier in this chapter, many researchers have expressed concerns with the unqualified application to social research of some of the ethical principles of the Belmont Report, as they are often unsuitable for such research. For example, in some ethnographic research, ensuring that absolutely all the research participants have the opportunity for informed consent might not be practicable. Nevertheless, it seems that RECs continue to review most social research proposals with the Belmont Report's principles in mind.

As the EPQ was used in the construction of the data collection instrument, it will be discussed in more methodological detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

2.5. Summary

The literature review presented in this chapter provided the historical context of research ethics and research ethics review, but also reminded one that unethical conduct amongst researchers has been, and still is, prevalent. Thus, research ethics regulation and oversight continues to be

necessary, at least in order to prevent harm from being done to research participants. Ideally, research ethics review should be able to rely on, or trust, researchers to conduct ethically sound research – an ideal that research institutions need to strive toward.

However, the ethics review process is often described as too bureaucratic, and critiqued for imposing natural science principles on social science disciplines. Although the ethics review process is regarded as restrictive by bio-medical researchers and social researchers alike, there seems to be a unique, principled discontentment amongst social researchers towards institutionalised ethics review. Furthermore, biomedical-inspired research ethics review, as it is often practiced, seem to pose unique challenges to social researchers conducting qualitative research, especially when the research involves vulnerable research populations (such as children, for example) or when the research topic is sensitive (for example teenage gangs in low-income communities). These challenges have potential implications for the knowledge base of disciplines, thus providing the rationale for this study of South African social researchers' experiences and perceptions of ethics review processes, and the research decisions they make in anticipation of such processes.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the methodological approach followed to reach the goal of answering the research questions of this study, as they were outlined in Chapter 1, will be described and justified. Various aspects of research methodology relevant to the project will also be reflected upon. Central to this discussion is a section dedicated to the processes that were involved in the construction of the online questionnaire used to collect data for this study. Towards the end of this chapter, the ethical considerations given for this study will be discussed.

3.2 Research design

This study will make use of a quantitative survey, a cross-sectional research design, as I aim to collect numerical data from different cases more or less simultaneously (Bryman, 2012:59). It is considered the most suitable design for a study such as this one, which is interested in variation in data collected from a relatively large population, and requires the coding or quantification of variables such as scientific domain, ethical position, methodological preference and overall orientation towards the REC in order to test relationships between these variables. Such a design will also allow the replication of this study by future researchers who wish to conduct a similar study at another university.

3.3 Research setting and population

Having served as a student representative on the REC of a well-known and widely respected South African university, I chose to conduct my study at that university. The university is committed to adhering to legal requirements of research ethics review and therefore functions closely in accordance to the NHREC. As the literature review showed, the NHA is comparable to similar laws regulating research ethics review in the USA. The findings and recommendations of this study may therefore apply to other countries with similar research ethics review systems in place.

The population is defined as academic staff members at the university who have, in the past five years, prior to the commencement of the study, and in their capacity as supervisor to postgraduate students and/or principal investigators of proposed research, applied for ethical clearance from the university's REC[3] for social (i.e. not medical) research involving human

[3] This REC is registered with South Africa's NHREC.

participants.Postgraduate students have been excluded from being potential participants to this study, because their interactions with the REC are typically too limited (most postgraduate students apply for ethics review at most two to three times before their final graduation). Academic staff are more likely to have had more extensive experience with research ethics review to have developed an orientation towards the REC. Other studies (e.g. McNeill *et al*., 1992; Liddle & Brazelton, 1996; Malouff & Schutte, 2005; Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2009) have also focused on the experiences of academic staff members at research institutions, rather than on those of postgraduate students.

Institutional permission to conduct research at the university was obtained from its division for institutional research and planning. Permission was also obtained to access the contact information of all the past and current applicants to the REC, but the studied university had only limited records in its information-management system of researchers who had applied for ethical clearance through the human-research REC over the past five years. It was therefore decided, with the permission and assistance of the abovementioned division, to e-mail a request for participation in the study to all academic staff members. Individuals to whom the survey did not apply also received this invitation e-mail, and therefore it informed the recipient of the criteria for inclusion in the population (as defined above), requesting those that do not meet those criteria to simply ignore the e-mail.

The total number of academic researchers who responded to the e-mail invitation by completing the online questionnaire, was 86. As the entire population, as defined above, was invited to participate in this study, no sample was drawn, and the data collected in this study are treated as census data (Bryman, 2012:187).

3.4 Data collection

3.4.1 Development of the questionnaire

As previously mentioned, this study was, in part, an effort to build upon the preliminary study of Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) of South African social scientists' experiences with research ethics review processes, as applied by the relevant REC. To describe those experiences, they collected data by means of a single, open-ended question in a questionnaire, asking researchers "to describe their experience of having their (or students') research reviewed by a research ethics committee". My study involved a much more detailed approach to measuring those experiences, and included a number of other objectives as well, and therefore required a more comprehensive questionnaire.

Throughout the design of the questionnaire, it was important to keep in mind the research objectives of this study (Sue & Ritter, 2007:38). The reason for this is to prevent an unreasonably

long questionnaire, and to ensure its coherence (Sue & Ritter, 2007:38). In reiteration, the research questions of this particular study may be summarised as follows:

- What are social researchers' experiences and perceptions of the process of institutionalised ethics review of social research by an REC?
- How do these orientations differ among social researchers according to their scientific domain; ethical position; and preferred methodological approach?
- To what extent does the ethics review process influence decisions respondents make when designing their research, and does the extent differ according to researchers' preferred methodology and scientific domain?

Once I had clarified my research questions, I reviewed previous studies related to research ethics review, especially the institutionalised ethics review of social science research. Where questionnaires were used, I considered whether items may be relevant, and could therefore be adapted, for the purpose of my study. However, as the literature review showed, the majority of these studies considered primarily practical issues encountered by researchers. Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009:74), in their South African study, also found that negative experiences primarily concerned pragmatic issues with the forms and procedures of the REC. They mention that previous studies reported principled discontent with an REC, but primarily on the basis of anecdotal accounts. To respond to the need for a study that also considers the ethical positions of researchers, I needed to develop items uniquely relevant to my study.

In this regard, Forsyth's (1980) conceptual framework and EPQ, already discussed in Chapter 2, was found to be useful. Particularly relevant to my study is the fact that the EPQ assesses the degree of idealism and rejection of universal moral rules in favour of relativism. I therefore incorporated Forsyth's EPQ into the structured questionnaire (see Section B in the questionnaire, attached as Appendix C to this thesis), but adapted the wording of the items to the context of academic research involving human participants.

Forsyth (1980:175) states that the two EPQ scales were found to have adequate internal consistency, and to be reliable over time. The scales were also found not to correlate with social desirability. Another scale, developed by Hogan (1970) for his survey of ethical attitudes, was considered, but its measurement of the psychological determinants of the disposition to employ one or other moral ideology (Hogan, 1970:205) did not correspond well to the objectives of this study. Forsyth's two EPQ scales, on the other hand, can be applied to investigations of moral judgement in any field[4] (Forsyth, n.d.), and was therefore deemed applicable to this study of ethics review of social science research.

[4] See: Forsyth, D. n.d. Ethics position questionnaire [online]. Available: https://donforsyth.wordpress.com/ethics/ethics-position-questionnaire/ [2015, February 11].

3.4.2 Structure of the online questionnaire

This section will briefly discuss the structure and content of the online questionnaire (for more detail on specific questions, please refer to Appendix C). The questionnaire consisted mostly of closed-ended questions, primarily to limit the time it would take for busy academics to complete. However, a few open-ended questions were included in order to ask respondents to elaborate on some responses, and to provide respondents with the opportunity to share any other experiences, thoughts or opinions they may have of the research ethics review processes at the university.

A. Background information

This section included an open question requesting respondents to report the discipline(s) in which they conduct the majority of their research and/or supervision. Also collected in this section was the methodological preference of the respondent, and that of their postgraduate students, where applicable. In addition to allowing a description, in aggregate, of the respondents in terms of relevant background information, these items collected data on variables that are important in answering the research question about how orientations differ among social researchers according to their scientific domain and preferred methodological approach.

B. Ethical positions

This section in the questionnaire consists of 20 items adapted from Forsyth's EPQ to measure respondents' ethical position within the particular (social research) context of this study. Forsyth (n.d.) provides clear guidelines for the use of the EPQ in survey research. The original EPQ makes use of a nine-point Likert scale ranging from disagreement (1) to agreement (9), but Forsyth permits the use of a five-point Likert scale, which was considered more appropriate for this study, as the study population is quite small, and a nine-point Likert scale would have produced too much variability for the limited number of cases.

C. Perceptions of ethical social research

This section originates from concerns of many social science researchers (for example, Haggerty, 2004; Van den Hoonaard, 2006) who claim that differences in perceptions of what ethical social research means are often the root cause of disputes regarding current systems of institutionalised ethics review of social science research. The basis of such claims is often that biomedical research principles are being imposed on social science research. Two closed-ended and three open-ended items were included in this section, but the data collected were not analysed for the purpose of this thesis, because of time limitations.

D. Perceptions of ethics review

This section collected data on whether or not researchers deem ethics review as necessary, as well as on their level of acceptance of ethics review of social science research, particularly as it is carried out by the REC concerned.

E. Influence of ethics review on research

This section was designed to determine the extent to which the ethics review process may influence decisions respondents make when designing their research.

3.4.3 Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted during the latter part of the process of designing the questionnaire, with the purpose of improving the face validity of the questionnaire, and to identify potentially problematic items – e.g. those that collect data that are not particularly useful or interesting, or make respondents uncomfortable – and/or unclear instructions that could result in items being omitted by respondents (Bryman, 2012:263). The pilot-study participants consisted of five individuals: a master's student, a PhD student and three established academics – two of whom were REC members at the time the pilot study was conducted. They formed a reference group of individuals from a variety of study fields who are informed on matters relating to ethical clearance (the postgraduate students had been trained in research ethics as part of a methodology course). The pilot-study participants did not participate in the main survey. The invitation e-mail, which included a link to the online questionnaire, and which was developed for the survey participants, was sent to pilot-study participants, but the latter were also requested to comment on the content of the invitation e-mail and the questionnaire.

The pilot-study participants commented on issues such as non-exhaustive response categories (e.g. in the item intended to measure respondents' preference for qualitative or quantitative methodological approaches), and pointed out that the e-mail invitation should communicate proof of ethical clearance and institutional permission. The pilot study also led me to change the labels of the Likert-type response categories from numbers to words. The reason for this was the concern that respondents may exchange the meaning of the numbers (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree), or instinctively associate the lowest value with "strongly disagree".

3.4.4 Questionnaire administration

A self-administered, web-based questionnaire was designed for the study. Considering that the population comprises academic researchers whose work typically occupies much of their time, the key advantage of a self-administered questionnaire is that respondents may complete the questionnaire at a time and speed that is convenient to them (Bryman, 2012:233). Self-

administered questionnaires also reduce interviewer effects, which are known to compromise the validity of survey results (Bryman, 2012:233).

The questionnaire was registered with, and stored in, SU's online survey system, which makes use of the Checkbox software package. It allowed me to create my own, customised, online questionnaire, and to test it before launching the survey. Collected responses are stored in a central, institutional database, which backs up the data, making it a secure form of data collection (see SU, 2015).

An email invitation to participate in the survey was sent to the whole population of potential respondents, as defined above. The email (see Appendix B) included a brief introduction to the study, and information pertaining to what would be required from participants, as well as what they could expect to be asked in the questionnaire. A link to the questionnaire was included at the bottom of the e-mail. Because the e-mail distribution list used for this survey was a list of all academic staff at the university, the e-mail also stated that those individuals who do not meet the population criteria need not respond.

The software was programmed to present respondents with only a few questionnaire items at a time, thereby preventing them from responding to items in any order they wish, which in turn minimises the potential for question-order effects that result from "changes in the placement of specific (general) questions relative to general (specific) questions in the survey" (DeMoranville & Bienstock, 2003:218). Furthermore, the software allowed the respondents to save their responses and return to the questionnaire at a later, more convenient time, if necessary.

3.5 Data processing and analysis

In order to analyse the data by producing a variety of relevant statistics, I made use of the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Science (IBM SPSS) Statistics, versions 22, 23 and 24. I also made use of the services of SU's Centre for Statistical Consultation for assistance with the statistical analysis of my data.

Making use of a web-based survey host rendered the processing and analysis of data more manageable. Similar to many other web-based survey hosts (Sue & Ritter, 2007:99), Checkbox allows for the downloading of online-questionnaire data, which may then be exported to a statistical package, such as IBM SPSS, for analysis. Exporting data to IBM SPSS eliminates the risk of error normally associated with the manual input of data from questionnaires to a statistical-analysis software package (Sue & Ritter, 2007:101). However, following the advice of Sue and Ritter (2007:108), the data were still cleaned once they had been exported to IBM SPSS. In addition, missing responses and open-ended questions were coded (e.g. self-reported disciplines were grouped into more general categories), and some responses were recoded, before proceeding with data analysis.

Descriptive analysis was conducted to produce frequency distributions and, where appropriate, measures of central tendency (means and medians) and of dispersion (such as the standard deviation) for a variety of variables, primarily to describe the population and as a basis for further analysis (Sue & Ritter, 2007:109). In some cases, ordinal-level variables (e.g. responses on a five-point Likert-type scale) were treated as scale or ratio-level variables, by calculating means and measures of dispersion. Although a contentious issue among methodologists, as this implies treating codes as scores that have numerical value, the Centre for Statistical Consultation (CSC) at SU advised that this is common practice, and approved following this approach.

In order to measure ethical position, first the scores attained for items 4.1 to 4.10 in the questionnaire (see Appendix C) were summed in order to calculate a respondent's idealism score (a variable referred to as "EPQ idealism"). Secondly, to calculate a relativism score (a variable referred to as "EPQ relativism") the scores attained for items 4.11 to 4.20 were added together. Based on respondents' scores in relation to the mean idealism and relativism scores for the population as a whole, respondents were then categorised in one of four ethical-position categories. I also constructed a single, composite variable to measure the overall orientation respondents have towards the REC, the calculation of which is described in more detail in the next chapter.

Bivariate analysis was then undertaken to determine how respondents' orientations towards the REC, both as a composite measure and its constituent indicators, may differ according to the scientific domains in which they work, their methodological preferences, and their ethical positions. To achieve this, the scores on overall orientation, as well as scores on each of the separate orientation indicators, were averaged across the categories of the relevant independent variables, using the "compare means" function in IBM SPSS.

In order to analyse the relationships between researchers' ethics-related decisions on the one hand and methodological preference and scientific domain on the other hand, I made use of cross-tabulation of these categorical variables (Field, 2009:783).

3.6 Ethical considerations

This study concerns a potentially sensitive research topic, and I therefore took certain measures to minimise various potential risks it may pose to the studied university and/or survey respondents. In order to maximise institutional anonymity, I omitted from my thesis the name of the university where the study was conducted, referring to it simply as "a South African university" or "the studied university".

With regard to respondents, ethical issues of informed consent and participant confidentiality required serious consideration. As mentioned previously, potential respondents were e-mailed an

invitation (see Appendix B) which included all the necessary information regarding the survey (e.g. the rationale for the study; what type of questions will be asked; and how long it would take, on average, to complete the online questionnaire). The decision to send the email invitation to all academic staff, because of a lack of information on applicants to the relevant REC, implied that many individuals who do not meet the population criteria were unfortunately but unavoidably "spammed" with an "unsolicited" e-mail invitation to a study not applicable to them. To address this problem, the invitation e-mail requested those to whom the e-mail does not apply, to simply ignore it.

Once respondents clicked on the link to the web-based questionnaire, they were presented with an online informed consent form. Once they had read the information, they were presented with two options in the form of radio buttons, i.e. that they agree to participate, or not. Clicking on a button served as a virtual signature. Respondents who agreed to participate could continue completing the questionnaire, while those who did not, were redirected to the end of the questionnaire and thanked for their time. The questionnaire and its items were designed in such a manner that, even if respondents agreed to participate, they could skip any question that they, for example, perceived as too sensitive or personal.

The confidentiality of the respondents' responses was ensured at all times: the Checkbox system is password-protected and only I had access to the responses submitted online. Respondents' identities were not revealed in any way in the reporting of the results. Questionnaire items that could potentially lead to the identification of respondents, such as the specific academic department with which a respondent is affiliated, were not included in the questionnaire, so as to further ensure the anonymity of respondents.

A final ethical consideration concerns the adaptation of the EPQ items. Although the questionnaire is freely available for use in an academic study, I will have to apply for permission to publish my research (Forsyth, 2015).

3.8 Summary

This chapter illustrated how the methodological approach employed in this study is closely aligned with its research questions. Specific methodological choices exercised in the design of this study were discussed and justified in terms of the various advantages and disadvantages associated with each. In particular, an advantage of using a quantitative survey or cross-sectional research design for this study is that it allows for the quantification of variables such as scientific domain, ethical position, methodological preference and overall orientation towards the REC, in order to investigate possible relationships between these variables. The themes emerging from previous studies about the ethics review of social science research, as discussed in the literature review, inspired the contents of the online questionnaire. Additionally, Forsyth's EPQ was shown to be of

relevance to this particular study, as it allows a quantifiable measure of the ethical positions of social science researchers at the studied university. Forsyth's EPQ is particularly useful to this study in that questionnaire items could be adapted to this particular research context.

Finally, this chapter also illustrated how ethical considerations for this study influenced the approach to data collection and analysis, and the reporting of results.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this thesis was to describe social researchers' perceptions of the process of institutionalised ethics review of social research by an REC at a South African university. In addition, this thesis aims to determine the extent to which social researchers make certain research decisions that may be related to ethics review, i.e. avoiding (and/or advising postgraduate students to avoid) "sensitive" research topics (particularly research on minors), and changing their research design in order to avoid perceived difficulties during the ethics review process. Thirdly, this thesis explores whether social researchers' orientations towards the REC may differ according to their scientific domain, the methodological approach(es) they tend to follow, and their ethical position.

As described in Chapter 3, an online questionnaire was employed for data collection to achieve the abovementioned aims. This chapter, Chapter 4, presents the results of the analysis of those data. First, the results of a descriptive, univariate analysis of the population in terms of most of the variables measured (including a composite measure of overall orientation to the REC) will be presented. This will be followed by the results of a bivariate analysis to test relationships between, on the one hand, respondents' scientific domain, their methodological preference and ethical positions, and, on the other, their orientation towards the REC, including their overall orientation, as well as the various indicators that comprise that orientation (i.e. level of satisfaction with, and various perceptions of, the REC). As mentioned in Chapter 3, no sample was drawn. Following Babbie and Mouton (2001) and Bryman (2012:187) it was therefore deemed inappropriate to apply inferential statistics, such as tests for statistical significance.

4.2 Results of the descriptive analysis

In this section, I present and discuss frequency distributions and, where appropriate, measures of central tendency and dispersion, to provide a description of the respondents in terms of discipline, preferred methodological approach, and ethical position. The section also describes the extent to which respondents take certain research decisions to avoid complicated ethics-review processes, how satisfied are they with the REC, and what their other perceptions of the REC are. A description of the use of these perceptions to construct a composite measure of overall orientation to the REC, and the results of an analysis thereof, concludes the section.

4.2.1 Discipline and scientific domain

The discipline(s) in which respondents conduct the majority of their research and/or supervision was considered an important variable in this study, not merely to describe the respondents, but also because I was interested in investigating how researchers from different groups of disciplines, or scientific domains, would experience the REC. Collected by means of an open question, the textual data were grouped into more general categories to provide an aggregate overview of the representation of respondents across the various disciplines within which they and their students conduct research.

Table 2: *Distribution across disciplines*

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Arts and social sciences	26	31.7
Medicine and health sciences	19	23.2
Economic and management sciences	17	20.7
Education	8	9.8
Natural Science	8	9.8
Engineering	2	2.4
Agricultural Sciences	1	1.2
Theology	1	1.2
Total	**82**	**100.0**

As Table 2 indicates, and as expected, the majority of the respondents (31.7%) conduct their research within the arts and social sciences. It is, however, clear that social research is not only conducted within these disciplines. The second largest group (23.2%) of respondents may be classified as working in medicine and the health sciences. The disciplines least represented among respondents are those within engineering (2.4%), the agricultural sciences (1.2%) and theology (1.2%). A considerable number of responses were received from the researchers in the economic and management sciences (20.7%), education (9.8%) and, interestingly, the natural sciences (9.8%). Although no information is available on the representation of disciplines among those who tend applying for REC review at the university under study, the distribution measured corresponds roughly to what my supervisor and I have observed while serving on the REC.

For the purpose of bivariate analysis, the results of which will be represented later in this chapter, this variable recoded into “scientific domain”, in correspondence with the South African National Research and Technology Audit surveys (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, 1998). The distribution of respondents across these domains is depicted in Table 3 below:

Table 3: *Scientific domain*

	Frequency	Percentage
Social sciences and humanities	52	63.4
Medicine and health sciences	19	23.2
Natural sciences and engineering	11	13.4
Total	**82**	**100.0**

The majority of the respondents (64%) belong to the social sciences and humanities category, which now also includes social research undertaken in the economic and management sciences, education and theology. Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents belongs to medicine and the health sciences, while only 13.4 per cent of the respondents are associated with the natural sciences and engineering.

4.2.2 Preferred methodological approach

Another variable considered relevant to the topic of this study is the methodological approach(es) or research strategy(ies) social researchers prefer to employ in their research. As Table 4 indicates, qualitative research is preferred by the majority (44%) of researchers, while only 31 per cent prefer quantitative research.

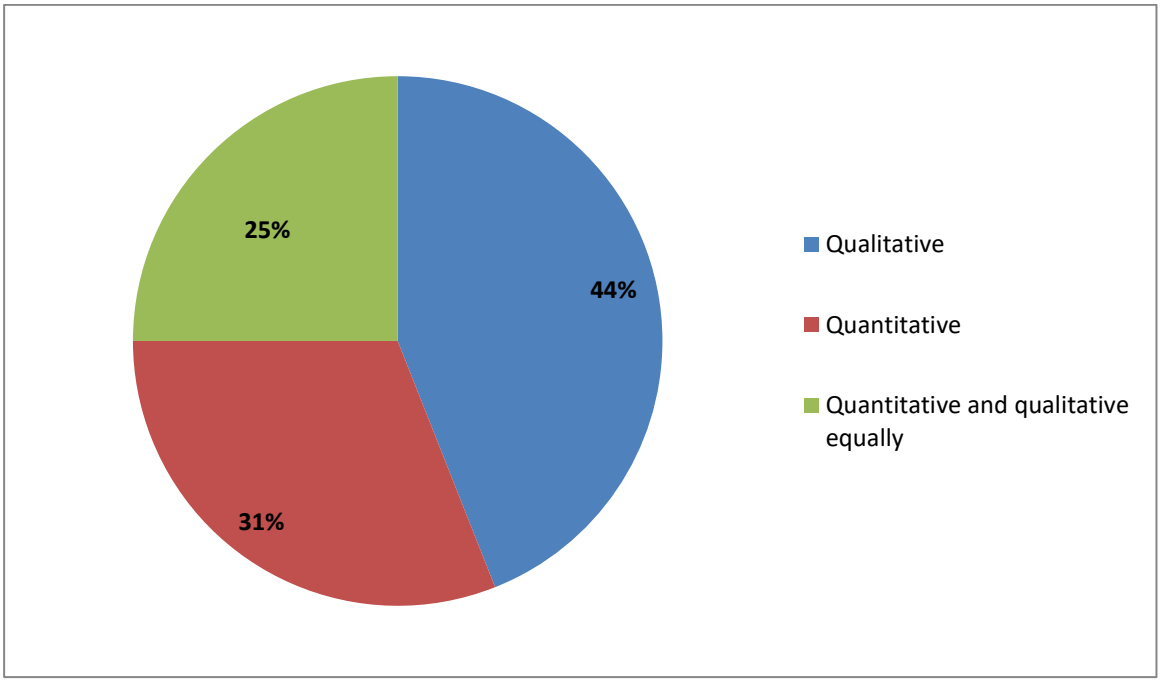
Table 4: *Preferred methodological approach*

	Frequency	Percentage
Mostly qualitative	31	36.5
Always qualitative	6	7.1
Subtotal: qualitative	*37*	*43.6*
Mostly quantitative	23	27.1
Always quantitative	3	3.5
Subtotal: quantitative	*26*	*30.6*
Qualitative and quantitative to an equal extent	21	24.7
Other	1	1.2
Total	**85**	**100.0**

While very few respondents indicated that they exclusively prefer only one methodological approach, a notable percentage (25%) expressed having equal preference for both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This, together with the observation that very few respondents unequivocally prefer either qualitative or quantitative research, indicates a tendency towards methodological pluralism (Payne, Williams & Chamberlain, 2004) amongst at least some of the respondents.

Because of the very few cases who always prefer either quantitative or qualitative methods, for the purpose of bivariate analysis these categories were merged with the "mostly qualitative" and "mostly quantitative" categories, respectively, to create a variable with only three categories: "qualitative", "quantitative" and "qualitative and quantitative equally". For further analysis, the response category "other" was also coded as "missing", because it includes only one case (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:428), which described his/her methodological preference as "conceptual". The distribution of the respondents on this recoded variable is presented in the pie chart below:

Figure 1: *Preferred methodological approach*



N=84

As the majority of applications to the REC originate from postgraduate students, under the guidance of their supervisors, the methodological preferences of respondents' postgraduate students are also relevant. .Table 5 below presents the distribution of respondents on this variable, which is similar to the distribution of methodological preference among supervisors in Table 4. According to the 73 supervisor-respondents, a greater percentage of their postgraduate students prefer qualitative research (42%) than quantitative research (36%) (although, interestingly, a somewhat greater preference for quantitative research is found amongst the postgraduate students than amongst their supervisors).

Table 5: *Preferred methodological approach of postgraduate students*

	Frequency	Percentage
Mostly qualitative	26	35.6
Always qualitative	5	6.8
Subtotal: qualitative	*31*	*42.4*
Mostly quantitative	20	27.4
Always quantitative	6	8.2
Subtotal: quantitative	*26*	*35.6*
Qualitative and quantitative to an equal extent	15	20.5
Other	1	1.4
Total	**73**	**100.0**

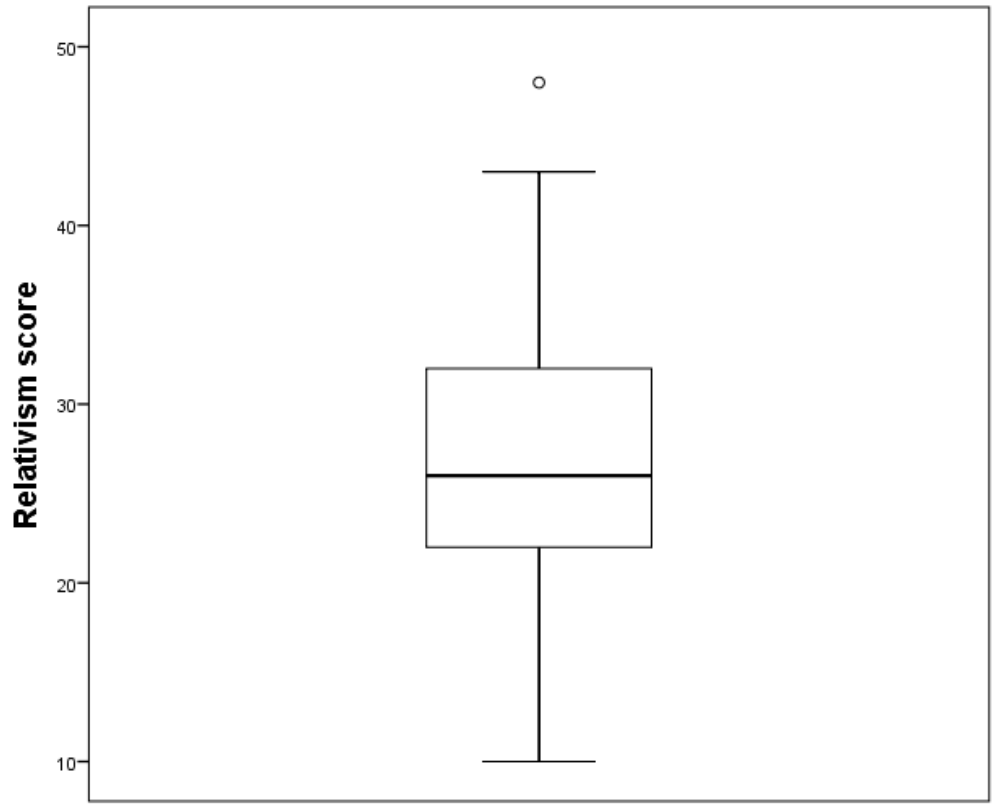
Another similarity with their supervisors is that very few of the postgraduate students always prefer only one methodological approach, while a considerable percentage (21%, slightly less than the 25 per cent of their supervisors) prefer qualitative and quantitative methodologies to an equal extent.

4.2.3 Ethical position

This section provides a discussion on the distribution of respondents across Forsyth's taxonomy of ethical positions, as measured by a slightly adapted version of his EPQ, and the subsequent calculation of scores in IBM SPSS. Forsyth (1980) argues that differences between individuals' ethical positions may be conceptualised in terms of the moral dimensions of idealism and relativism (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion). The ethical positions of respondents were therefore calculated based on the extent to which they adopted either an idealistic or a relativist ethical approach (for more information on how these scores were calculated, refer to Section 3.5 in Chapter 3).

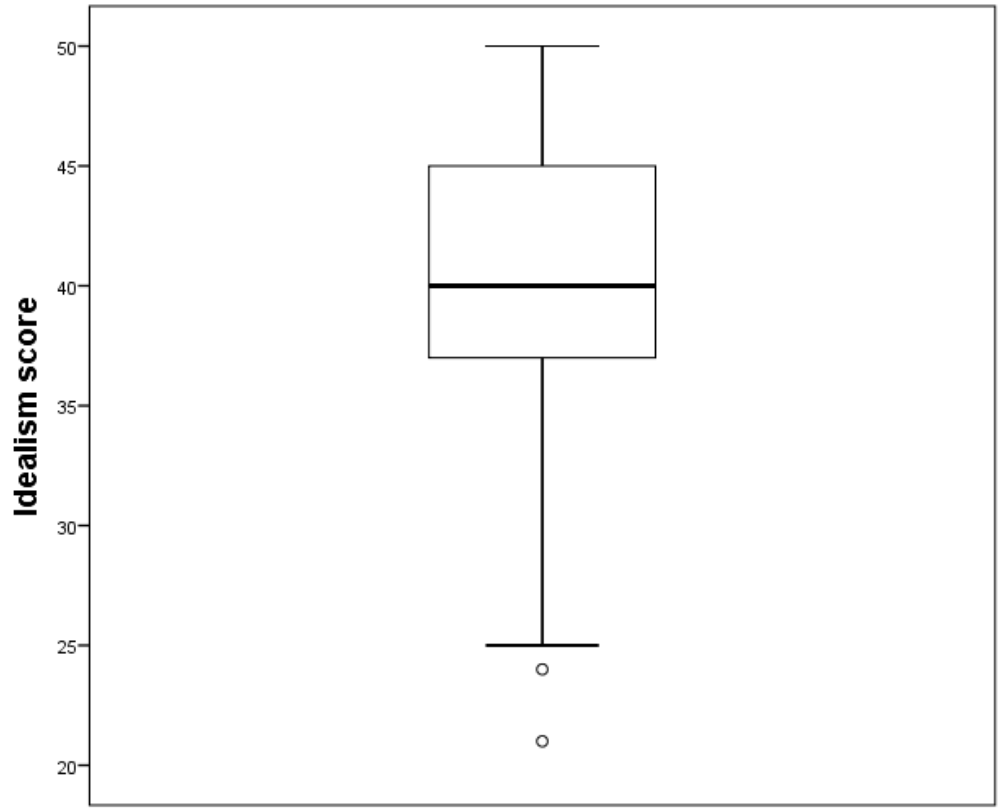
Figures 2 and 3 below present, by means of boxplots, the dispersion of respondents' relativism and idealism scores. Figure 2 shows that there is more variability among respondents who have relativism scores above the median, than is the case below the median. Similarly, Figure 3 shows that there is more variability among idealism scores above the median. A comparison of the standard deviation for the two sets of scores shows a greater variability among the relativism scores than among the idealism scores.

Figure 2: *Boxplot of respondents' relativism scores*



N=83; mean relativism score=26.52; std. deviation=7.108; median=26

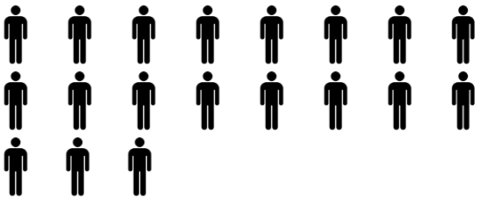
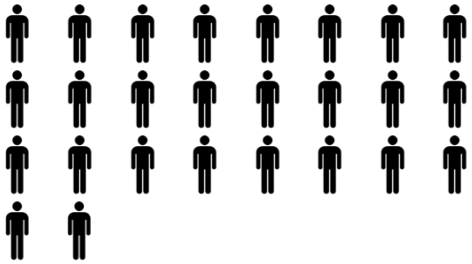
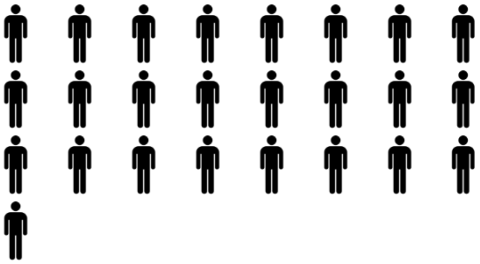
Figure 3: *Boxplot of respondents' idealism scores*



N=83; mean idealism score=39.70; std. deviation=6.550; median=40

Based on respondents' mean idealism and relativism scores in relation to the means for the population as a whole, they were categorised in one of four ethical-position categories, as depicted in Table 6 below, which also presents the distribution across these ethical positions of the 83 respondents who responded to all questions on ethical position.

Table 6: *Distribution across ethical positions*

Idealism	**Relativism**	
	High	*Low*
High	Situationists If EPQ idealism > mean, and EPQ relativism > mean  (N=13; 15.7%)	Absolutists If EPQ idealism > mean, and EPQ relativism < mean  (N=19; 22.9%)
Low	Subjectivists If EPQ idealism < mean, and EPQ relativism > mean  (N=26; 31.3%)	Exceptionists If EPQ idealism < mean, and EPQ relativism < mean  (N=25; 30.1%)

N=83

The largest percentage of respondents (31%) may be categorised as subjectivists, but a very similar percentage (30%) may be regarded as exceptionists. Absolutists constitute the third-most frequent category (23% of respondents), while the minority (16%) of respondents can be regarded as situationists. Table 6 therefore reveals that the two ethical positions most prominent amongst respondents are those associated with relatively low levels of idealism, i.e. the subjectivist and exceptionist positions.

4.2.4 Ethics-related research decisions

Ethics-related research decisions refer to those which social researchers may make, in their capacity as researchers or supervisors, before applying for ethical clearance from the REC, in order to avoid "sensitive" topics, and/or applying certain research designs, which would be more

likely to involve greater scrutiny from the REC, and thereby (perceived) difficulties with the research ethics review process. The results concerning the first decision, respondents' own tendency to avoid sensitive topics, are as follows:

Table 7: *Tendency to avoid researching sensitive topics*

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Never	31	38.8
Sometimes	19	23.8
Often	24	30.0
Always	6	7.5
Total	**80**	**100.0**

Approximately 40 per cent of respondents indicated that they have never avoided sensitive research due to the perceived difficulties involved in gaining ethics clearance from the REC for such research. The remaining majority of approximately 60 per cent of respondents have, however, done so – at least sometimes. Approximately half of those have often avoided sensitive topics for this reason, but only a relatively small minority (7.5%) have always avoided sensitive research due to the perceived difficulties involved in gaining ethics clearance from the REC for such research.

The results concerning respondents' decision on whether to advise their postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics, for the same reason as above, are depicted in Table 8 below:

Table 8: *Tendency to advise postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics*

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Never	27	37.0
Sometimes	15	20.5
Often	17	23.3
Always	14	19.2
Total	**73**	**100.0**

Amongst those 73 respondents who supervise postgraduate students, again the majority (slightly more than 60 per cent) indicated that they have advised their postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics. These 46 respondents are split into three relatively equally sized groups of respondents who have often, sometimes and always done so.

The prevalence of the methodological decision of whether or not to change a research design in order to avoid a perceived lengthy and/or complicated research process, is depicted in Table 9:

Table 9: *Tendency to change research design*

	Frequency	Percentage
Never	31	38.8
Sometimes	14	17.5
Often	24	30.0
Always	11	13.8
Total	**80**	**100.0**

It is evident from Table 9 that again the majority (more than 60 per cent) of respondents have at least sometimes felt the need to change their research design to avoid complications with regard to ethics review. Half of those felt the need to do so often, while close to 15 per cent always did. Similar to the results found with regard to respondents' decision to avoid sensitive research topics, only about 40 per cent of respondents have never felt the need to change their research design.

4.2.5 Level of satisfaction with the REC

One of the central objectives of this thesis is to measure the extent to which respondents have found their experiences with the REC to be satisfactory. Figure 4 below shows the frequency distribution of respondents' level of satisfaction with their experiences with the REC:

Figure 4: *Level of satisfaction with the REC*

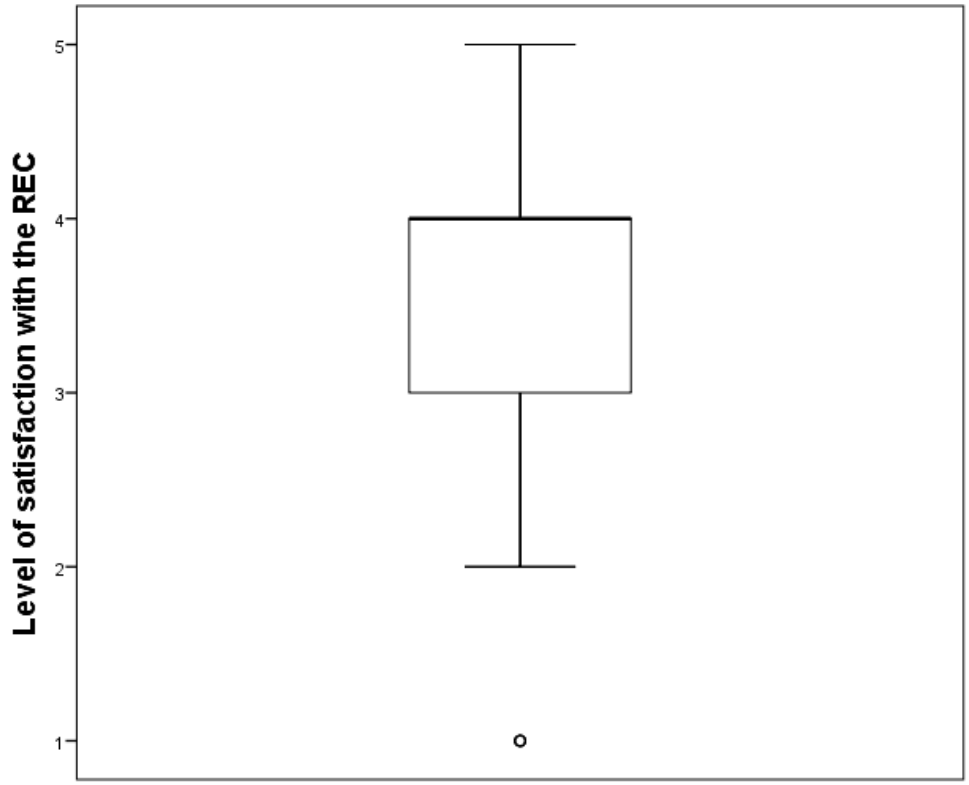
N=81

Almost two-thirds (63%) of the respondents found their experience with the REC to have been either satisfactory or very satisfactory. It should be noted, however, that, on the other end of the scale, only 14 per cent of respondents found their experience with the REC to have been very satisfactory and, despite a general satisfaction with the REC expressed by the majority of the

respondents, nearly 30 per cent describe their experience as average, and approximately 1 in 10 of found their experience to have been unsatisfactory or very unsatisfactory.

Figure 5 presents the results when level of satisfaction with the REC is treated as a ratio-level variable, in order to further reduce the data.

Figure 5: *Boxplot of level of satisfaction with the REC*



1= Very unsatisfactory; 2= Unsatisfactory; 3= Average; 4= Satisfactory; 5= Very satisfactory
N=81; mean=3.62; std. deviation=0.956; median=4

The median level of satisfaction (4) is quite high, while the mean is slightly lower, at 3.62 (SD = ±0.956) is relatively low. This is due to the greater variability among respondents with a level of satisfaction lower than the median.

4.2.6 Perceptions of the REC

As pointed out in Chapter 2, several authors have considered the perceptions that social researchers may have of an REC. This section reports on the extent to which the respondents in this study held some of these perceptions, measured by presenting respondents with statements reflecting these perceptions, together with five-point, Likert-type response options that indicate level of agreement or disagreement with a particular statement, as well as the neutral position, “neither agree nor disagree”.

4.2.6.1 The REC as an impediment to research

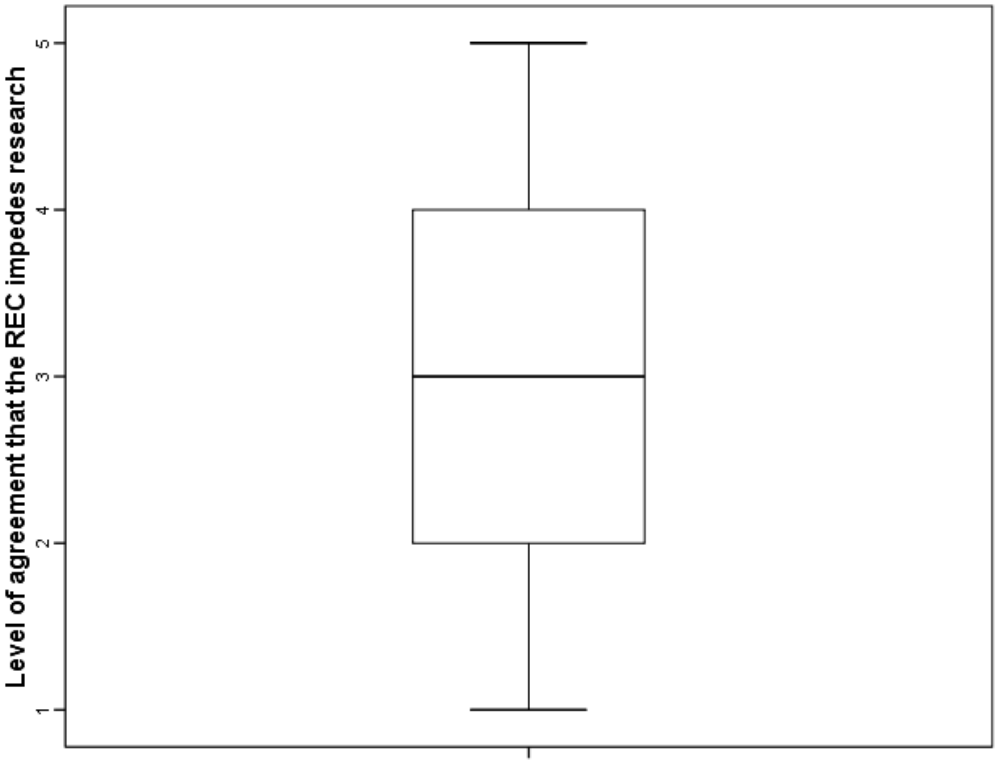
Table 10 below shows that slightly less than a third (31%) of respondents agreed (to varying degrees) that the REC impedes social research. A notably large proportion – a quarter of respondents – was neutral in this regard, while the largest percentage (44%) of the respondents disagreed with the view that the REC impedes social research.

Table 10: *Perception of the REC as an impediment to social research*

	Frequency	**Percentage**
Strongly disagree	7	8.5
Disagree	29	35.4
Neither agree nor disagree	21	25.6
Agree	19	23.2
Strongly agree	6	7.3
Total	**82**	**100.0**

Below, Figure 6 depicts the dispersion of respondents' perception that the REC impedes current research efforts. The median is 3 (neither agree nor disagree) and the data are equally distributed above and below the median. The mean level of agreement is slightly lower, at 2.85, but on average, respondents seem to take a neutral position on whether the REC impedes research efforts or not.

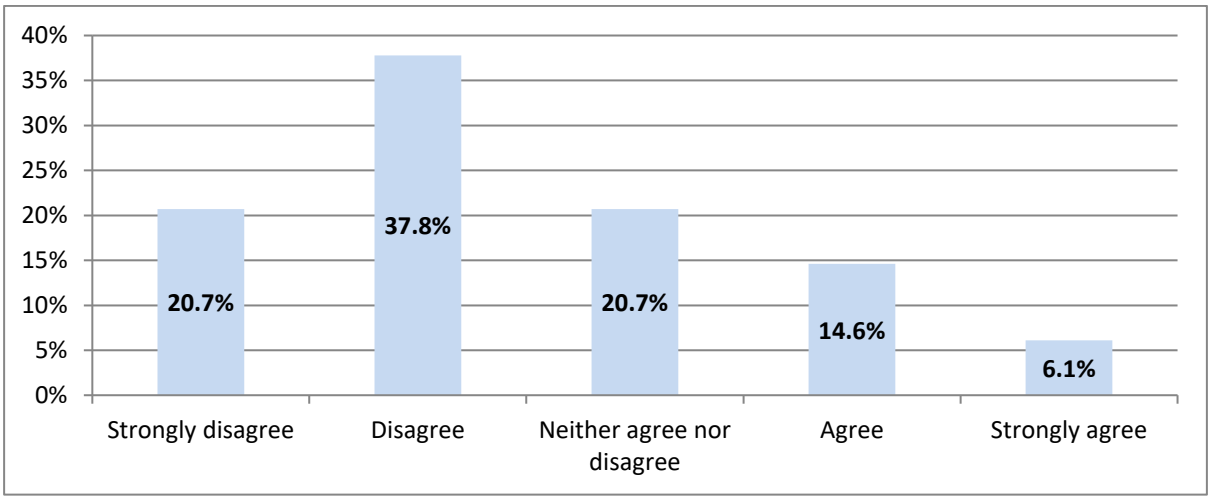
Figure 6: *Boxplot of level of agreement that the REC impedes research efforts*



1= Strongly disagree; 2=Disagree; 3= Neither agree nor disagree; 4= Agree; 5= Strongly agree
N=82; mean=2.85; std. deviation=1.101; median=3

The results of another, more indirect, measure of whether the REC is perceived as impeding social research is presented in Figure 7 below. The majority of the respondents (approximately 60 per cent) disagreed (to varying degrees) with the statement that social researchers would conduct more research if there were no REC to obtain ethical clearance from. Furthermore, approximately 20 per cent of respondents indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, while the remaining 20 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that more social research would be done if there were no REC.

Figure 7: *Perception that more research would be done if there were no REC*



N=82

To conclude, nearly a third of respondents perceive the REC as an impediment to their research efforts, while one in five are of the view that social researchers would conduct more research if there were no REC. The results presented in this section also revealed that respondents showed a considerably high level of neutrality, which may be interpreted as uncertainty, on the matter of whether the REC is an impediment to social researchers.

4.2.6.2 The REC's principles and their execution

As Table 11 below indicates, a very high percentage (approximately 95 per cent) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with what the REC represents in principle. Only two respondents disagreed, and both of them held this view strongly.

Table 11: *Level of agreement, in principle, with what the REC represents*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	2	2.4
Neither agree nor disagree	2	2.4
Agree	50	61.0
Strongly agree	28	34.1
Total	**82**	**100.0**

Due to the resulting lack of variability across the categories of this variable, the relationship between it and others, such as ethical position, will not be tested.

When respondents assessed not the principles themselves, but the manner in which the REC executes them, close to half (48%) of them did not consider such execution as problematic.

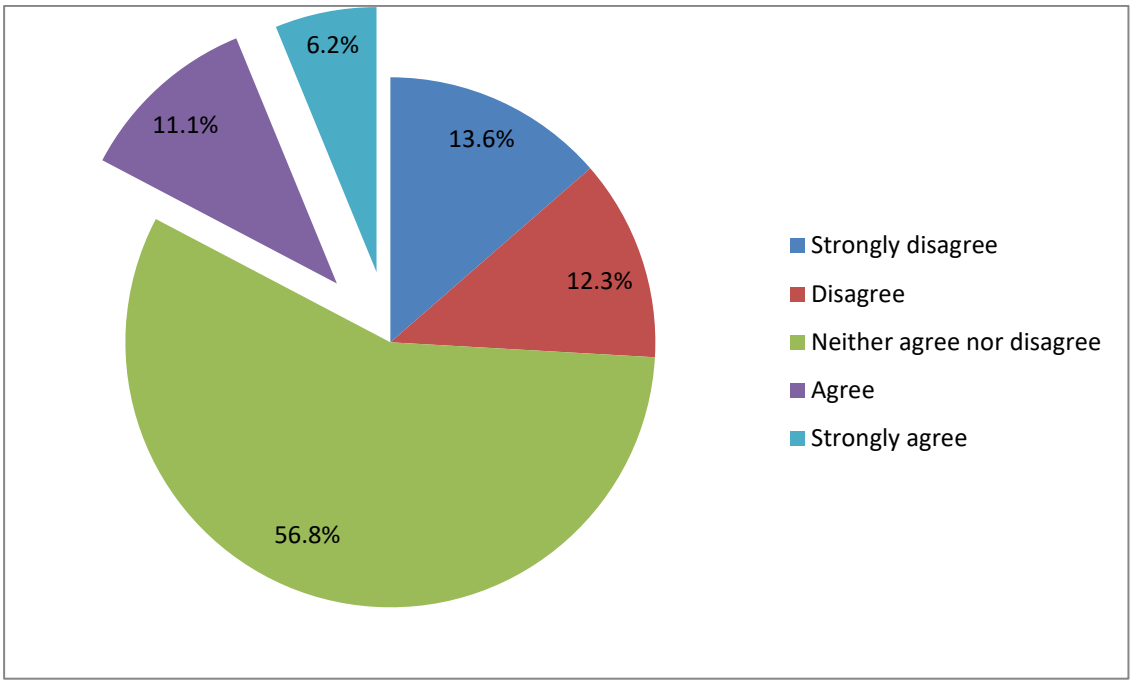
Table 12: *Perception on whether the manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	5	6.2
Agree	15	18.5
Neither agree nor disagree	22	27.2
Disagree	27	33.3
Strongly disagree	12	14.8
Total	**81**	**100.0**

However, 25% of respondents held the negative perception that the way in which the REC executes its principles is problematic, while nearly 30 per cent of respondents were undecided on the matter.

Figure 8 below shows the result of another, related assessment, i.e. whether respondents perceived the REC to be biased in favour of quantitative research. Close to one in five of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the REC is biased in favour of quantitative research, while approximately a quarter disagreed, to varying degrees, with this view. Strikingly, the majority, more than half (57%) of the respondents, were undecided on the matter.

Figure 8: *Perception that the REC is biased in favour of quantitative research*



N=81

4.2.6.3 The importance of ethics review

The next set of respondents' perceptions that will be described, relate to the importance of ethics review. When asked directly about the level of importance of ethics review, only one of the respondents took a neutral stance, while another five respondents either disagreed or (again in the case of only one respondent) strongly disagreed that ethics review is important (see Table 13 below). The remaining respondents, an overwhelming majority of more than 90 per cent, agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (57%) that ethics review is important.

Table 13: *Perception that ethics review is important*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	1	1.2
Disagree	4	4.8
Neither agree nor disagree	1	1.2
Agree	30	36.1
Strongly agree	47	56.6
Total	**83**	**100.0**

These results are further supported by measures of central tendency and dispersion: a mean of 4.42 and a median of 5 shows that respondents tend to strongly agree, on average, that ethics review is important. A small standard deviation of 0.843 indicates that there is very little variability among respondents' (high) level of agreement with regard to the importance of ethics review. Of all the perceptions measured, this one produced the highest level of agreement among

respondents, and because of this lack of variability, this variable will not be used for bivariate analyses.

Further as to the importance of ethics review, two-thirds of respondents held the perception that the protection offered to research participants justifies the effort involved in the review process. The remaining third was approximately equally divided between those who take a neutral position and those who disagreed to varying degrees with the view. Table 14 presents these results in more detail:

Table 14: *Perception that protection offered to research participants by ethics review justifies the effort involved in the review process*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	3	3.7
Disagree	11	13.4
Neither agree nor disagree	14	17.1
Agree	35	42.7
Strongly agree	19	23.2
Total	**82**	**100.0**

Finally, as Table 15 below depicts, slightly more than 60 per cent of the respondents believe that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard. It should be noted that nearly half of those held a strong view in this regard. A similar percentage, nearly 30 per cent of the respondents, neither agreed nor disagreed with this view, while the minority (slightly more than 12 per cent) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard.

Table 15: *Perception that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard*

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly disagree	4	4.9
Disagree	6	7.3
Neither agree nor disagree	22	26.8
Agree	27	32.9
Strongly agree	23	28.0
Total	**82**	**100.0**

4.2.7 Orientation towards the REC: a composite measure

In order to further reduce the data and to facilitate bivariate analysis, a single, composite variable was constructed to measure the overall orientation respondents have towards the REC, expressed as a single score. This composite measure, or scale, was compiled using a sum

function to add respondents' scores on level of satisfaction with the REC, as well as on the perceptions described above, with the exception of "level of agreement, in principle, with what the REC represents" (because of lack of variability on this measure). The categories of items with a positive orientation were recoded, to ensure that for all items a lower score indicated a more negative orientation, and a higher score a more positive one. The highest possible score is 45 (the highest score per item, or 5 x 9 items), which indicates the most positive orientation towards the REC, while the lowest possible score is 9 (the lowest score per item, or 1 x 9), which indicates the most negative orientation to the REC.

Internal reliability emerges as an issue when a composite, single score is calculated from a variety of indicators, as it is important that these indicators are related to one another (Bryman, 2012:170). As stated by Bryman (2012:170), Cronbach's alpha is a commonly used to test for internal reliability, and an acceptable level of reliability is 0.8. I found that the scale exhibited sufficient internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha=0.81)[5], which indicates that the questionnaire items used in the scale were reliable in terms of measuring the general orientation of researchers towards the REC.

[5] Cronbach's alpha = 0.820627; standardised alpha = 0.809541; average inter-item correlation = 0.334334.

Table 16 below presents in more detail the results of the reliability analysis of the items used to compute the composite score. It shows what the reliability of the scale would have been if one of the items were deleted. If the internal correlation of any of the items were negative (meaning the item is not related to the other items on the scale), the relevant item would have to be removed. Since none of these items had a negative correlation, and deleting any of them would make no difference to the reliability of the composite score, all of the items can be considered as reliably contributing to an indication of overall orientation towards the REC.

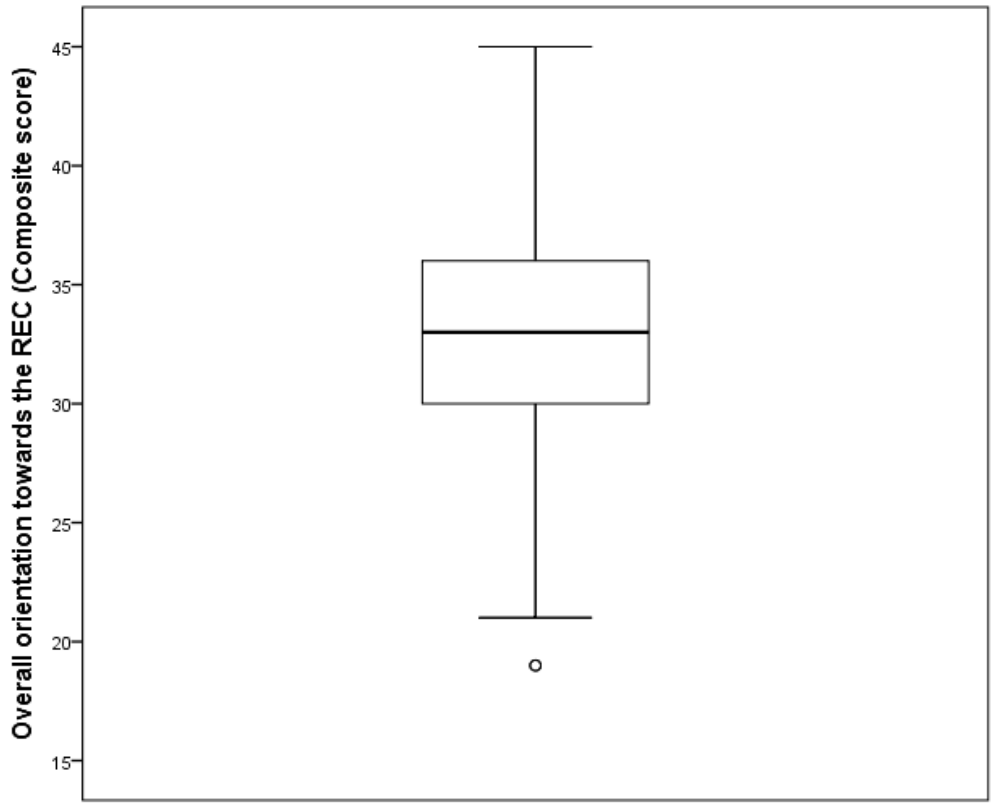
Table 16: *Reliability analysis of the composite score for general orientation towards the REC*

Questionnaire item	Mean if item is deleted	Inter-item correlation	Alpha if item is deleted
1. I agree with what the REC represents in principle	28.68831	0.223051	0.829846
2. Ethics review is important	28.50649	0.308835	0.823714
3. I would do more research if there was no REC	29.37662	0.617988	0.789932
4. Overall, the protection offered to research participants by ethics review justifies the effort involved in the review process	29.24675	0.556194	0.798175
5. The REC currently facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard	29.19481	0.636076	0.787744
6. The REC is biased in favour of quantitative research	29.79221	0.266820	0.831751
7. Overall experience with the REC until now[6]	29.31169	0.659805	0.786135
8. The manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic	29.59740	0.659551	0.784206
9. The REC currently impedes research efforts	29.76623	0.713979	0.776828

Among the 77 respondents for whom all the data were available to allow a score to be calculated, the scores ranged from a minimum of 19 to a maximum of 45. While the maximum possible score (45) was obtained, the minimum possible score (9) was not. Both the mean and the median scores are 33, thus the orientation of respondents towards the REC appears to be fairly positive, on average. That being said, the standard deviation (5.789) for this composite measure indicates some variance in this regard. Figure 9 presents the dispersion of respondents' overall orientation towards the REC.

Figure 9: *Boxplot of overall orientation towards the REC*

[6] This item's response options differed from those of the rest of the items. Instead of five response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, respondents were presented with the five response options ranging from very unsatisfactory to very satisfactory.



N=77; mean=32.94; std. deviation=5.789; median=33

Figure 9 shows that the levels of variability above and below are very similar, with two outliers who had an exceptionally negative overall orientation towards the REC.

4.3 Results of the bivariate analysis

In order to understand in more depth the respondents' orientations towards the REC, bivariate analysis was undertaken to determine how respondents' orientation towards the REC may differ according to the scientific domains in which they work, their methodological preferences, and their ethical positions. In the case of each of these independent variables, their relationship with overall orientation (the composite measure) is presented first, followed by their relationship with each of the indicators that comprises the composite measure (referred to here as "orientation indicators"), in order to highlight any deviations from the pattern, and differences in strength of relationship, observed for overall orientation.

4.3.1 Relationship between scientific domain and orientation towards the REC

Below, I investigate the relationship between respondents' scientific domain and their overall orientation towards the REC, as well as between their scientific domain and each of the indicators of overall orientation.

4.3.1.1 Overall orientation towards the REC

Considering differences among disciplines in terms of topics researched and research designs applied, as well as the reviews of the literature in Chapter 2, one may expect researchers in various disciplines to differ in terms of their orientation towards the REC. This indeed seems to be the case: as Table 17 below shows, the respondents in the social sciences and humanities attained the lowest (most negative) mean overall score for orientation towards the REC. That being said, those in the natural sciences and engineering exhibit a slightly higher, but similar, mean overall orientation towards the REC. The respondents conducting research within medicine and the health sciences display the highest overall mean orientation towards the REC.

Table 17: *Mean and dispersion of overall orientation, by scientific domain*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Range	Min	Max
Social sciences and humanities	47	32.28	6.460	26	19	45
Medicine and health sciences	19	34.74	4.331	15	28	43
Natural sciences and engineering	9	32.56	4.851	16	28	44
Total	**75**	**32.93**	**5.846**	**26**	**19**	**45**

While respondents in the social sciences and humanities are similar to those in medicine and the health sciences in terms of mean orientation score, the minimum score amongst those in the former is much lower (19) than is the case for the other two scientific domains.

4.3.1.2 Separate analysis of orientation indicators

Table 18 below provides a comparison of respondents in the three scientific domains in terms of their mean scores on each separate orientation indicator (i.e. the individual items that comprise the composite measure). It shows that the pattern is similar to what was found for overall orientation, i.e. that the respondents in the social sciences and humanities score lowest, and those in medicine and the health sciences score highest.

Table 18: *Mean and dispersion of orientation indicators, by scientific domain*

		Agree with what the REC represents in principle	Agree that ethics review is important	More research would be done if there was no REC	Overall, the protection offered to research participants by ethics review justifies the effort involved in the review process	REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard	The REC is biased in favour of quantitative research	Satisfaction with REC experience	The manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic	REC impedes research efforts
Social sciences and humanities	*N*	50	51	50	51	51	50	50	50	50
	Mean	4.22	4.47	3.36	3.57	3.51	3.28	3.56	3.24	2.98
	Std. deviation	.708	.731	1.225	1.153	1.223	1.031	1.072	1.222	1.204
Medicine and health sciences	*N*	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19	19
	Mean	4.53	4.47	3.89	4.05	4.21	2.74	3.68	3.47	3.68
	Std. deviation	.513	1.124	.937	.848	.713	.933	.749	.905	.582
Natural sciences and engineering	*N*	11	10	11	10	10	10	9	10	11
	Mean	4.18	4.10	3.73	3.50	3.80	3.20	3.67	3.20	3.18
	Std. deviation	.405	.876	1.104	1.080	.789	.789	.707	1.033	1.079
Total	***N***	**80**	**80**	**80**	**80**	**80**	**79**	**78**	**79**	**80**
	Mean	**4.29**	**4.43**	**3.54**	**3.68**	**3.71**	**3.14**	**3.60**	**3.29**	**3.18**
	Std. deviation	**.640**	**.854**	**1.158**	**1.088**	**1.105**	**.997**	**.958**	**1.123**	**1.100**

However, based on mean scores, the following exceptions are observed:

- The level of agreement with what the REC represents in principle

While respondents across disciplines show a high level of agreement with what the REC represents in principle, the highest positive orientation score (4.53) on this indicator is found among respondents in medicine and the health sciences. Those respondents also exhibit a high variability for this orientation indicator.

- The importance of ethics review

For this orientation indicator, respondents in the social science and humanities, as well as those in medicine and the health sciences attained the highest score (4.47). It is quite interesting to note that there was the least variability among the social science and humanities respondents with regard to the importance of ethics review.

- The REC is biased in favour of quantitative research

With regard to the perception that the REC is biased in favour of quantitative research, it appears that respondents in the social sciences and humanities were the least likely, relative to their counterparts in the other scientific domains, to hold this negative view of the REC (as their score, at 3.28, is the highest for this orientation indicator). Even more interesting, is that those in medicine and the health sciences are more likely to hold this negative view of the REC than the respondents in the other two disciplines. Again however, the standard deviations show that there is more variability in terms of this negative view among social science and humanities respondents.

4.3.2 Relationship between methodological approach and orientation towards the REC

Considering the literature reviewed for this thesis and my own informal conversations with social researchers, I was led to expect that qualitative researchers would be more inclined to have had negative experiences with ethics review, and (possibly as a result) hold a negative orientation towards the REC.

4.3.2.1 Overall orientation towards the REC

Using the composite variable and based on mean scores the relationship between methodological preference and overall orientation towards the REC was analysed. As seen in Table 19, those respondents who prefer quantitative methods, as well as those who prefer both quantitative and qualitative methods, attained the highest, and very similar, mean overall orientation scores. The lowest orientation score is found among respondents with a preference for qualitative methods, but it should be noted that they share the lowest minimum score with those who prefer quantitative methods.

Table 19: *Mean and dispersion of overall orientation, by methodological preference*

	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Qualitative	32	32.22	5.672	19	45
Quantitative	24	33.67	6.288	19	44
Qualitative and quantitative equally	20	33.65	5.234	26	44
Total	**76**	**33.05**	**5.734**	**19**	**45**

4.3.2.2 Separate analysis of orientation indicators

In this section, respondents with different methodological preferences will be compared in terms of their means on the separate orientation indicators. In Section 4.3.2.1 it was found that respondents who prefer quantitative methods are more likely than their colleagues to have a positive overall orientation towards the REC. In particular, respondents who prefer qualitative methods were found to be more likely to have a negative orientation towards the REC. Generally, this was also the case when considering each of the orientation indicators separately (see Table 20), but with the following exceptions:

- The importance of ethics review

The highest mean score (4.48) for this orientation indicator belongs to respondents who prefer quantitative research methods. Similarly, the mean score for respondents who prefer qualitative methods is 4.42. Respondents who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally, are less likely than other respondents to regard the REC as important. That being said, there is also the highest amount of variance among respondents who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally in terms of regarding the REC as important.

- The protection offered to research participants by the REC

On this orientation indicator, respondents who prefer quantitative methods attained the highest mean score (3.92) Respondents who preferred qualitative and quantitative methods equally, had the second highest mean score (3.81). With a mean score of 3.43, respondents who prefer qualitative methods are least likely to believe that the protection offered to research participants by the REC justifies the effort involved in the research process.

- Satisfaction with REC experience

Respondents who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally were least likely (mean score of 3.52) than other respondents to report that they were satisfied with their overall experience with the REC, while respondents who prefer qualitative research methods were most likely to do so.

Table 20: *Mean and dispersion of orientation indicators, by methodological preference*

		Agree with what the REC represents in principle	Ethics review is important	More research would be done if there was no REC	Protection justifies the effort involved in the review process	REC facilitates research of a higher ethical standard	REC is biased in favour of quantitative research	Satisfaction with REC experience	Manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic	REC impedes research efforts
Qualitative	*N*	34	36	34	35	35	34	35	35	34
	Mean	4.09	4.42	3.44	3.43	3.57	3.06	3.69	3.17	3.06
	Std. deviation	.933	.770	1.307	1.195	1.145	1.179	.867	1.124	1.071
Quantitative	*N*	26	25	26	25	25	25	24	25	26
	Mean	4.31	4.48	3.58	3.92	3.88	3.32	3.63	3.40	3.12
	Std. deviation	.471	.872	.987	1.038	1.092	.748	1.173	1.225	1.143
Qualitative and quantitative	*N*	21	21	21	21	21	21	21	20	21
	Mean	4.48	4.38	3.71	3.81	3.81	3.24	3.52	3.50	3.38
	Std. deviation	.512	.973	1.007	.928	1.078	.889	.873	1.051	1.117
Total	***N***	**81**	**82**	**81**	**81**	**81**	**80**	**80**	**80**	**81**
	Mean	**4.26**	**4.43**	**3.56**	**3.68**	**3.73**	**3.19**	**3.63**	**3.33**	**3.16**
	Std. deviation	**.721**	**.847**	**1.129**	**1.093**	**1.107**	**.982**	**.960**	**1.134**	**1.101**

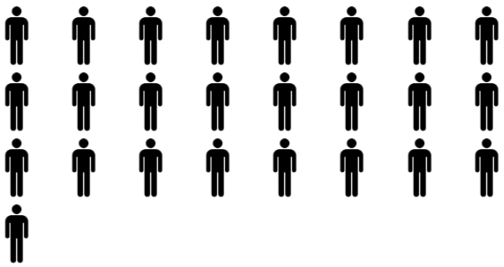
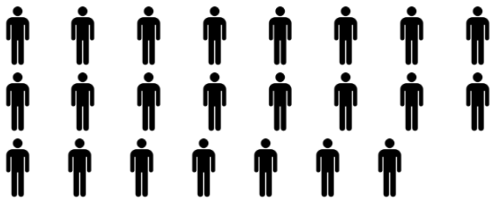
4.3.3 The link between ethical position and orientation towards the REC

This section considers the possible link between ethical position and overall orientation towards the REC. Below follows comparisons of respondents holding various ethical positions in terms of means, first for overall orientation score and then for the separate indicators comprising this score.

4.3.3.1 Overall orientation towards the REC

As shown in Table 21, respondents who hold an absolutist ethical position attained the highest mean orientation score (35.69). This means that absolutists were more likely than respondents holding other ethical positions to have a positive overall orientation towards the REC. The second highest mean orientation score (34.43) is found among respondents holding an exceptionist ethical position. It follows that the two ethical positions characterised by the lowest levels of relativism are most likely to be associated with an overall positive orientation towards the REC. On the other hand, respondents with the lowest mean overall orientation scores tend to be situationists (30.82) and subjectivists (29.96) – ethical positions that are characterised by high levels of relativism.

Table 21: *Mean overall orientation, by ethical position*

Idealism	**Relativism**	
	High	*Low*
High	Situationists mean overall orientation: **30.82**  (N=11; Std. Deviation: 5.546)	Absolutists mean overall orientation: **35.69**  (N=16; Std. Deviation: 5.558)
Low	Subjectivists mean overall orientation: **29.96**  (N=25; Std. Deviation: 5.311)	Exceptionists mean overall orientation: **34.43**  (N=23; Std. Deviation: 4.679)

4.3.3.2 Separate analysis of orientation indicators

To determine whether this pattern applies to the individual indicators that comprise the composite index of overall orientation, respondents in holding different ethical positions are compared in terms of the means they attained for each orientation indicator. Table 22 below provides the results of this analysis. For most of the orientation indicators, I find (as we did for overall orientation) that absolutists, with their low levels of relativism, are more likely than respondents holding other ethical positions to have a positive orientation towards the REC. However, contrary to the pattern I found for overall orientation, exceptionists, who are characterised by a high level of relativism, attained the highest mean scores for some of the indicators, followed by absolutists with the second-highest means. These indicators are: agreement with what the REC represents in principle; considering ethics review important; and the belief that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard.

Table 22: *Mean and dispersion of orientation indicators, by ethical position*

		Agree with what the REC represents in principle	Ethics review is important	More research would be done if there was no REC	Protection justifies the effort involved in the review process	REC facilitates research of higher ethical standard	REC is biased in favour of quantitative research	Satisfaction with REC experience	Manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic	REC impedes research efforts
SIT	*N*	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	11	12
	Mean	4.33	4.08	3.33	3.50	3.58	3.08	3.42	2.91	3.08
	Std. dev.	.492	1.165	1.231	.905	.900	1.084	.996	1.136	1.165
ABS	*N*	19	19	19	19	19	18	17	19	19
	Mean	4.32	4.58	3.79	4.21	3.89	3.39	3.88	3.58	3.26
	Std. dev.	1.003	.769	1.273	1.134	1.449	.979	.928	1.216	1.195
SUB	*N*	26	25	26	25	25	25	25	25	26
	Mean	3.96	4.16	3.27	3.16	3.24	3.04	3.36	2.96	2.73
	Std. dev.	.662	.943	1.002	.987	1.052	.978	1.114	1.098	1.041
EXC	*N*	23	25	23	24	24	24	25	24	23
	Mean	4.43	4.68	3.57	3.79	4.04	3.08	3.68	3.54	3.48
	Std. dev.	.590	.476	1.161	1.021	.751	1.060	.690	.932	.994
Total	***N***	**80**	**81**	**80**	**80**	**80**	**79**	**79**	**79**	**80**
	Mean	**4.24**	**4.41**	**3.49**	**3.65**	**3.69**	**3.14**	**3.58**	**3.28**	**3.13**
	Std. Dev	**.733**	**.848**	**1.147**	**1.080**	**1.098**	**1.009**	**.942**	**1.109**	**1.107**

4.4 Ethics-related decisions: the role of scientific domain and methodological preference

The literature review has shown that concerns about ethics review among social scientists (especially those with a qualitative approach) often arise from the fact that principles from a different domain (i.e. biomedicine, which is also predominantly quantitative) tend to guide RECs in their oversight of social science research. One may therefore expect that researchers in domains furthest removed from biomedicine and researchers who prefer a qualitative methodology, would be most likely to change aspects of their research in anticipation of ethics review not quite suited to their domain and methodology.

4.4.1 *The role of scientific domain*

Table 23 illustrates the relationship between scientific domain and the tendency of respondents to avoid sensitive topics because of the difficulties involved in gaining ethical clearance for such research. Among those who have never avoided sensitive research topics, the percentage is highest by far among those in medicine and the health sciences, while it is lowest among respondents from the social sciences and humanities.

Table 23: *Relationship between scientific domain and the tendency to avoid sensitive research topics*

	Scientific domain		
Tendency to avoid sensitive topics	*Social sciences and humanities*	*Medicine and health sciences*	*Natural sciences and engineering*
Never	15 (31.3%)	10 (52.6%)	5 (50.0%)
Sometimes	10 (20.8%)	6 (31.6%)	3 (30.0%)
Often or always	23 (47.9%)	3 (15.8%)	2 (20.0%)
Total	**48 (100%)**	**19 (100%)**	**10 (100%)**

Among those who tend to often or always avoid sensitive research, the majority are from the social sciences and humanities. It would be reasonable to state, at least tentatively, that a relationship exists between scientific domain and the tendency to avoid sensitive research.

I was also interested in the relationship between scientific domain and the tendency of respondents to advise their postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics (because of perceived difficulties they will encounter when applying for ethical clearance). Among those who never advise their students against sensitive topics the highest percentage by far (70%) work in the natural sciences and engineering – 8 per cent more those in medicine and the health sciences (62.5%) and almost 50 per cent more than those in the social sciences and humanities (22.7%), as Table 24 shows:

Table 24: *Relationship between scientific domain and the tendency to advise postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics*

	Scientific domain		
Tendency to advise postgraduate students against sensitive topics	*Social sciences and humanities*	*Medicine and health sciences*	*Natural sciences and engineering*
Never	10 (22.7%)	10 (62.5%)	7 (70.0%)
Sometimes	10 (22.7%)	3 (18.8%)	1 (10.0%)
Often or always	24 (54.5%)	3 (18.8%)	2 (20.0%)
Total	**48 (100%)**	**16 (100%)**	**10 (100%)**

When considering the tendency to often/always advise against sensitive topics, the pattern remains more or less the same. Among those who often/always advise against sensitive topics,

the highest percentage by far work in the social sciences and humanities (55%), followed by those in the natural sciences and engineering (20%) and the lowest percentage (19%) is found among the researchers in medicine and the health sciences. Table 24 therefore shows a relationship to exist between researchers' scientific domain and their tendency to advise their postgraduate students against sensitive research topics.

In Table 25, the results of an analysis of the relationship between respondents' scientific domain and their tendency to change their research design to avoid a lengthy REC process, is presented. The tendency to never change their research design was most pronounced among those from medicine and the health sciences (58%) and the least pronounced among those in the social sciences and humanities (29%).

Table 25: *Relationship between scientific domain and the tendency to change research design*

	Scientific domain		
Tendency to change research design	*Social sciences and humanities*	*Medicine and health sciences*	*Natural sciences and engineering*
Never	14 (29.2%)	11 (57.9%)	5 (50.0%)
Sometimes	8 (16.7%)	4 (21.1%)	2 (20.0%)
Often or always	26 (54.2%)	4 (21.1%)	3 (30.0%)
Total	**48 (100%)**	**19 (100%)**	**10 (100%)**

Considering the opposite tendency, namely the tendency to often/always change their research design, the pattern remains the same: it is most pronounced by far among the researchers in the social science and humanities (54%) and least pronounced among their counterparts in medicine and the health sciences (21%). Table 25 therefore also shows a relationship to exist between respondents' scientific domain and their tendency to change their research design in anticipation of a lengthy and/or complicated ethics-review process.

4.4.2 The role of preferred methodology

Table 26 presents the results of an analysis of the relationship between respondents' methodological preference and their tendency to avoid sensitive research. Among those who reported never having avoided sensitive research, the majority (48%) is found to be researchers who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally, followed by those who prefer qualitative methods (38.2%) and then those who prefer quantitative methods (33.3%).

Table 26: *Relationship between methodological preference and the tendency to avoid sensitive research topics*

	Methodological preference		
Tendency to avoid sensitive topics	*Qualitative*	*Quantitative*	*Quantitative & qualitative*
Never	13 (38.2%)	8 (33.3%)	10 (47.6%)
Sometimes	8 (23.5%)	5 (20.8%)	6 (28.6%)
Often or always	13 (38.2%)	11 (45.8%)	5 (23.8%)
Total	**34 (100%)**	**24 (100%)**	**21 (100%)**

When the opposite tendency, i.e. often/always avoiding sensitive research, is considered, the pattern stays the same. It is most pronounced among respondents who prefer quantitative research methods and least pronounced among those who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally. The fact that quantitatively oriented researchers are more likely than their qualitative oriented peers to avoid sensitive topics is somewhat unexpected. However, the percentage of those qualitative researchers who often/always avoid sensitive research topics is still quite high (38.2%). Table 26 seems to suggest that a relationship exists between respondents' tendency to avoid sensitive research and their methodological preference.

Table 27 allows one to consider the possibility of a relationship between respondents' methodological preference and their tendency to advise postgraduate students against sensitive research. Among those who never advise postgraduate students against sensitive topics, the highest percentage (53%) prefer qualitative and quantitative research equally, while the lowest percentage (28%) prefer qualitative methods.

Table 27: *Relationship between methodological preference and the tendency to advise postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics*

	Methodological preference		
Tendency to advise postgraduate students against sensitive topics	*Qualitative*	*Quantitative*	*Quantitative & qualitative*
Never	9 (27.3%)	9 (40.9%)	9 (52.9%)
Sometimes	8 (24.2%)	3 (13.6%)	4 (23.5%)
Often or always	16 (48.5%)	10 (45.5%)	4 (23.5%)
Total	**33 (100%)**	**22 (100%)**	**17 (100%)**

Among the respondents who often/always advise postgraduates against sensitive research, the highest percentage (49%) are those who prefer qualitative research, while the lowest percentage prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally. Table 27 shows that a relationship exists between researchers' methodological preference their tendency to advise their postgraduate students against sensitive research topics.

Table 28 shows the results of an analysis of the relationship between respondents' methodological preference and their tendency to change their research design. Never doing so is most pronounced among respondents who prefer qualitative and quantitative methods equally (43%), and least pronounced among those who prefer quantitative methods (38%).

Table 28: *Relationship between methodological preference and the tendency to change research design*

	Methodological preference		
Tendency to change research design	*Qualitative*	*Quantitative*	*Quantitative & qualitative*
Never	13 (38.2%)	9 (37.5%)	9 (42.9%)
Sometimes	5 (14.7%)	6 (25.0%)	3 (14.3%)
Often or always	16 (47.1%)	9 (37.5%)	9 (42.9%)
Total	**34 (100.0%)**	**24 (100.0%)**	**21 (100.0%)**

Among those who report that they often/always change their research design, the highest percentage (47%) prefer qualitative methods and the lowest percentage (38%) prefer quantitative methods. Table 28 suggests the existence of a relationship between respondents' methodological preference their tendency to change their research design to avoid a length and/or complicated ethics-review process.

4.5 Summary

This chapter presented the results of an analysis of data collected from respondents by means of an online survey conducted in August-2015, with the aim to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. A total of 86 academic staff members responded, who, either for their own research or the research of their postgraduate students, had applied for ethics clearance from a Humanities REC during the five years prior to the survey. As one would expect, the majority of respondents conduct research in the social sciences and humanities domain (i.e. the arts and social sciences; economic and management sciences; education; and theology). They also tend to prefer a qualitative research methodology when they conduct their own research or supervise postgraduate students.

The majority of respondents exhibit low levels of idealism, and therefore tend to hold subjectivist and exceptionist ethical positions. More than half have at least sometimes made the decision, or advised their postgraduate students, to avoid sensitive research and/or to make changes to their research design, in an effort to avoid a perceived lengthy and/or complicated research ethics review process.

With regard to respondents' level of satisfaction with the REC, the majority report their experience to be either satisfactory or very satisfactory. However, approximately a third of the

respondents' agreed (to varying degrees) with the statement that the REC is an impediment research. In addition to this, one in five respondents reported that they would have done more research if there had been no REC.

That being said, the vast majority of respondents (95%) agreed with what the REC represents, in principle. Another near unanimously held perception (90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed) is that ethics review is important. On the other hand, almost a third of respondents were undecided on whether the manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic. A sizable majority of respondents were also undecided about whether they agreed that the REC is biased in favour of quantitative research.

The majority of respondents (two-thirds) reported their agreement that the protection offered to research participants justifies the effort involved in the ethics review process. More than 60% of respondents believe that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard. With regard to respondents' overall orientation towards the REC, respondents in general appear to have a fairly positive overall orientation towards the REC.

This chapter also considered the relationship between some of the characteristics of respondents, and their orientation towards the REC. The results show that respondents in the social sciences & humanities as well as in the natural sciences & engineering are most likely to have a negative orientation towards the REC, although those in medicine and the health sciences feel most strongly that the REC is biased in favour of quantitative research.

Another set of relationships I was interested in testing were those between respondents' methodological preferences and their orientation towards the REC. As the literature and anecdotal evidence led me to expect, I found those who prefer quantitative methods to be most satisfied with the REC. It is therefore also not surprising that the negative views that the REC impedes research efforts, and that it is biased in favour of quantitative methods, is most pronounced among those who prefer only qualitative methods, and that positive views, i.e. that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard, is by far least pronounced among those researchers. Overall, respondents who prefer qualitative research methods are most likely to have a negative orientation towards the REC.

Respondents' ethical positions were also found to be linked to their overall orientation towards the REC: those holding positions low in relativism (absolutists and exceptionists) are, in general, more positive towards the REC than their colleagues with high levels of relativism (subjectivists and situationists). Absolutists tend to be most positive, and subjectivists most negative, with the exception that exceptionists are more likely than absolutists to agree that the REC facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard, and that subjectivists are less likely than situationists to hold the negative perception that the manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic.

An interpretation of these results and their implications will be provided in the next, final chapter, to indicate the extent to which these research questions have been answered, as well to provide recommendations to the REC at the studied university.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This thesis provided an empirical analysis of social researchers' orientations towards, and responses to, an REC at a South African university, against the background of the origins and history of research ethics review of social research at academic institutions. In addition to this literature, previous studies related to mine, by virtue of having been conducted on the experiences of social researchers with an REC, were also reviewed. This allowed me to identify gaps in the literature, as well as various themes which informed my research questions and, in turn, the items that comprised my data collection tool, a web-based questionnaire.

Very few of the studies I reviewed considered more than practical points of critique researchers level against their REC. With specific reference to South Africa, a preliminary study on ethics review by Wassenaar and Mamotte (2009), which involved a survey of South African social scientists, provides a first, tentative indication of those scientists' experience with the ethics review process. One of this study's recommendations is that further research on this topic is needed in South Africa. My thesis responds to this call, and makes a contribution to the field of research ethics, by focusing not only on practical issues social researchers raise in relation to an REC, but by also describing and better understanding in terms of their scientific domains, methodological preferences and ethical positions, those researchers' responses to, satisfaction with, and perceptions of, institutionalised ethics review of social research by an REC at a South African university.

In order to meet these objectives, data were collected by means of a web-based questionnaire, the link to which was sent by e-mail to all potential respondents who, in the five years preceding the commencement of my study, had conducted social research and/or supervised students who had conducted social research, which was reviewed by the REC for human research in the humanities. Among the social researchers who responded to the online survey, the majority work in the social sciences and humanities, and prefer to follow a qualitative research approach, as do the postgraduate students they supervise. This chapter discusses the main research results and how they relate to both the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

5.2 Researchers' decisions in anticipation of REC review

I aimed to determine whether social researchers respond strategically to ethics review, by making certain decisions prior applying for seeking ethical clearance from the REC. The literature led me

to anticipate a tendency among social researchers to avoid, and advise their postgraduate students against, sensitive research topics and/or certain research designs (e.g. research designs where obtaining informed content is impractical), in an attempt to avoid envisaged difficulties with the research ethics review process. These two issues often overlap, as sensitive research topics often require approaches that could be construed as invading participants' privacy, and RECs (understandably so) tend to be more cautious and critical when reviewing research proposals that involve in-depth contact with research participants on such sensitive issues. This is often the case, for example, for qualitative ethnographies. Sensitive research topics could also include research about an institution such as a university. A case in point is the study I conducted for this thesis, which, for that very reason, involved a difficult and lengthy process of gaining ethical clearance and institutional permission.

It was therefore not surprising to find that a sizable majority (more than half) of the social researchers have at least sometimes avoided conducting research on sensitive topics, made changes to their research design, or advised their postgraduate students to do the same, due to the perceived difficulties involved in gaining ethics clearance from the REC for such research. This shows that an unintended consequence of the REC's closer scrutiny of sensitive research topics and certain designs is likely to impede some social research endeavours, albeit indirectly. In Chapter 2, I reviewed critique levelled against RECs that pertains to the possible effects of research ethics regulation on social research. My research contributes empirically to this debate, and echoes Van den Hoonaard's (2006) finding on the significant effect of the implementation of national research ethics guidelines on the types of studies conducted by master's students. In particular, Van den Hoonaard's study showed an increase in "participant evacuated" research, i.e. studies that do not involve research participants, and a decrease in the use of field work as a data collection method.

Van den Hoonaard (2006:83) refers to the effects of these trends as a "pauperization" in a particular discipline (sociology), which threatens the quality of research produced, and so threatens the significance of contributions made by research in the discipline. My study provides another example of research ethics regulation influencing trends in social research, with potentially significant implications for the body of knowledge that is being produced by social researchers, as certain topics – arguably important ones in South Africa – become under-researched.

I found that researchers from the social sciences and humanities would be most likely to avoid sensitive research topics (such as child abuse, disability, and institutional racism). They, as well as qualitatively oriented researchers, are also most likely to advise their postgraduate students to do so, in anticipation of a difficult and/or lengthy REC process. This makes sense when one considers that postgraduate students in particular are limited in terms of the time they have to complete their studies in order to meet graduation deadlines.

In addition, researchers working in the social sciences and humanities are most likely to change their research design in anticipation of perceived difficulties with research ethics review of designs that deviate from what is commonly found in biomedical research. These are usually inductive and qualitative, as is the case with some ethnographic and participant observation studies. Indeed, my study found that qualitatively oriented researchers are most likely to change their research design in order to avoid a difficult REC process.

My results therefore affirm Van den Hoonaard's (2006) findings and should be cause for concern particularly for the qualitative social sciences, as well as for the REC. Strategic responses of researchers to REC review could very well mean that the potential for "methodological pluralism" (Payne, 2007) is reduced. As Payne (2007) argues, the type of data needed to answer a question should be dependent on the research question, while my research shows that it is, at least to some extent, dependent on how onerous a review process is envisaged to be. Such methodological decisions, as well as choice of research topic, may be based on previous experiences with, and/or perceptions of, ethics review, which is the topic I turn to next.

5.3 Orientations towards institutionalised ethics review

Various sets of orientations social researchers may have towards the REC were described in my study, namely their perception that the REC is an impediment to social research, their level of agreement with the REC's principles, and their overall satisfaction with the REC. More than half of social researchers indicated that, overall, their experience with the REC had been, to varying degrees, satisfactory. However, more than a third's description of their experiences with the REC ranged from "average" to "very unsatisfactory", and one in four reported their experiences to have been wholly unsatisfactory. This points towards a need to understand and address the negative experiences that give rise to dissatisfaction. However, it should also be noted that the results are not exceptional, but correspond to those of previous studies on social researchers' level of satisfaction with an REC. For example, Liddle and Brazelton (1996) found two decades ago that one in four social researchers in the USA are "rather dissatisfied" with their REC. In a more recent study, specifically on South African social science researchers' experiences with the REC, Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) found that 43 per cent of researchers reported to have had a positive experience with the REC, while 21 per cent had negative experiences, and the remainder had "mixed feelings" towards the REC.

In order to further understand these results, as well as the avoidance by researchers of certain topics and methodologies, their perception that the REC is an impediment to social research is important to understand. As my review of the literature showed, one of the points of critique levelled against institutionalised research ethics review in its current form – particularly its foundation on biomedical principles – is that the REC tends to be an impediment to social

research. Interestingly, my study found that less than a third of social researchers agreed with this view. The results are quite similar to those of Ferraro *et al*. (1999), who showed that less than 30 per cent of researchers from various departments at a university in the USA agreed that the REC impedes research efforts. It is important to note, however, that in my study approximately one in four of the social researchers did not express a clear perception as to whether the REC impedes social research. In addition, one in five social researchers indicated that they would have been able to do more research if there had been no REC.

Despite the fact that some social researchers perceive the REC as impeding social research, the overwhelming majority do not seem to be opposed to the idea of an REC per se. The social researchers in my study agreed almost unanimously with the principles the REC represents, and that the REC is important. In previous studies, such as those of Liddle and Brazelton (1996), Ferraro *et al*. (1999) and Malouff and Schutte (2005), it was also found that most researchers consider the REC as important, and are not opposed to the existence of an REC at their institution. Thus, the REC can rest assured that social researchers value ethical research and value that research participants require protection from unethical research practices.

While nearly all social researchers agree with the importance of the principles the REC represents, it is the manner in which the REC executes these principles that is more likely to be perceived as problematic, with a quarter of social researchers expressing this negative perception of the REC, and another third undecided on this matter. This indecision of social researchers might indicate that they perceive the REC's execution of its principles as problematic at certain times, but not others. A specific manner in which the REC may be perceived as executing its work in a problematic manner, is for it to be biased in favour of quantitative research. A minority (one in five) of the social researchers hold this view, but what is again more interesting is the fact that by far the majority are undecided on this topic. Not knowing why respondents choose a neutral position is unfortunately an unavoidable limitation of the research design used for my study. A future qualitative study regarding the strong tendency among social researchers to choose a neutral position on this and the previous issue would therefore provide interesting insights.

A selection of the abovementioned perceptions, together with level of satisfaction with the REC, was used to construct a measure of the overall orientation social researchers have towards the REC, which revealed that approximately half of social researchers had an overall negative orientation. It is therefore recommended that the REC engage with the social researchers whom they serve, to discuss the origin of negative perceptions and experiences they may have had with the REC. For example, such discussion could cast light on the reasons underlying the perception that the REC impedes social research.

In order to guide the REC in such efforts, it is important to determine the specific subgroups of social researchers which are most likely to be negatively inclined towards the REC and should therefore be targeted through such interventions. In the following sections, I will therefore interpret

the results of a comparison of the orientations of social researchers from different scientific domains, who follow different methodological approaches, and hold different ethical positions. In general, the interpretation is also aimed at contributing to our scholarly understanding of the possible reasons for negative (or positive) orientations towards an REC.

5.4 Understanding differences in orientations

5.4.1 The role of scientific domain

I found a notable relationship between scientific domain and social researchers' overall orientation towards the REC. Those who are most likely to exhibit a negative orientation, conduct their research in the social sciences and humanities and, to a lesser but similar extent, the natural sciences and engineering. On the other hand, I found that social researchers in the medical and health sciences are by far the most likely to have a positive orientation towards the REC.

These results may be better understood against the background of key historical moments in research ethics review. As mentioned by Ferraro *et al.* (1999), one of these moments is the development of the Declaration of Helsinki by the World Health Organization in 1964. While this declaration was developed for the purpose of promoting ethical principles in biomedical research, in some countries (for example, the USA and South Africa) the law defines all social science research as "health research", which is therefore subject to this declaration and the requirement to submit research proposals to a relevant REC for ethics review. However, the principles have been developed with medical research in mind, and those working within the scientific domain of the medical and health sciences are arguably most accustomed to a medical approach to ethics review, which may go some way to explain why they exhibit the most positive overall orientation towards the REC.

The principles are, however, not well suited to the review of social science research. In fact, there has been a reoccurring concern amongst social researchers that the research ethics review system is one that imposes biomedical research principles on social science research. Empirical research reviewed in Chapter 2 shows that this is one of the most fundamental criticism of the ethics-review process voices by social science researchers. Natural scientists and engineers constitute the smallest percentage of the researchers who apply for ethics review of social research. As they do not routinely conduct social research, they are least familiar with either biomedical principles, or research ethics in general, which could explain why they are almost as likely to exhibit a negative orientation towards the REC than those in the arts and social sciences. It would therefore be beneficial for the REC to first and foremost direct efforts at improving the way they are perceived to these researchers.

5.4.2 *The role of methodology*

This study showed that, among the social researchers studied, methodological approach is a relatively strong predictor of whether they would have an overall positive or negative orientation towards the REC. Based on my review of studies such as those of Ramcharan and Cutcliffe (2001) and Van den Hoonaard (2006), and informal conversations I had with social researchers, this result was anticipated. In particular, I expected that qualitative researchers would be the most inclined to have an overall negative orientation towards the REC. This was indeed the case, with qualitative social researchers being the least inclined to exhibit a positive overall orientation towards the REC. Based on these results, the REC may find it helpful to pay closer attention to the experiences and perceptions of social researchers who prefer qualitative research methods.

5.4.3 *The role of ethical position*

Theoretically, this thesis made use of Forsyth's (1980) taxonomy of ethical ideologies, which also provided a tool with which to measure the ethical positions of social researchers. To recapitulate the discussion in Chapter 2, situationism would be the ethical position of a researcher who considers the context of each ethically questionable action, such as neglecting to ask research participants to provide informed consent. Absolutism, on the other hand, is the ethical position associated most strongly with reliance on universal moral judgments to guide actions. To illustrate in relation to this study, an absolutist social researcher would, without exception, advocate research that poses no harm to research participants, regardless of the benefits to a broader population, or insights, such research may provide. Exceptionism is similar to absolutism, in that it involves strong reliance on universal moral rules to decide whether a research practice is ethical. Unlike absolutism, however, exceptionism advocates that exceptions need to be made to universal ethical codes in some contexts. Finally, subjectivism is the ethical position that advocates the making of ethics-related judgments based on a researcher's own, personal values.

The social researchers that the REC had served in the five years prior to my study were found to exhibit low levels of idealism. According to Forsyth (1980:176), they would therefore recognise that, when making ethical decisions, undesirable consequences can often occur simultaneously with desirable consequences, as opposed to idealistically assuming that desirable consequences can be obtained, given the right circumstances. More importantly, however, low levels of idealism are also associated with the exceptionist ethical position. As was explained in Chapter 2, it may be argued that the REC on which my study focused, as an institution, is arguably most closely aligned with the same exceptionist position.

However, low levels of idealism are also associated with a subjectivist position, which advocates for ethics-related judgments to be made based on a researcher's own, personal values. In fact, the majority of the social researchers in this study were categorised as subjectivists, which indicates a potential for conflict between the majority of the researchers and the REC. I

hypothesised that researchers with ethical positions contrary to those of the REC, i.e. subjectivists and situationists who are characterised by high levels of relativism, would have the most negative orientation towards the REC. This is ultimately, the difference between these above-mentioned researchers and the REC.

My research supports this hypothesis, as it found that social researchers who hold ethical positions high in relativism are most likely to have a negative overall orientation towards the REC. Situationist and subjectivist social researchers have mostly relativistic approaches to ethics. These social researchers have an appreciation for a contextual research ethics review process that considers the unique circumstances of each proposed research project.

Conversely, in this study the social researchers who hold an absolutist ethical position were most inclined to have an overall positive orientation towards the REC. Guided by Forsyth's (1980) this means that social researchers who believe following REC procedures at all times, and under all conditions will lead to ethical research practices, would tend to have the most overall positive orientation towards the REC. Social researchers with an exceptionist ethical position believe, similarly to absolutists, that universal codes should be followed to ensure ethical research, but are open to pragmatic considerations of exceptions to these universal codes. It is therefore no surprise that social researchers with the exceptionist ethical position are also (albeit to a lesser extent than absolutists) likely to have an overall positive orientation towards the REC at the studied university.

Mamotte and Wassenaar (2009) mention that very few social researchers at a South African university voiced their principled criticisms towards the REC. Also, as discussed in Chapter 2, other authors (for example, Ramcharan and Cutcliffe, 2001; De Vries and DeBruin, 2004; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004; and Van den Hoonaard, 2006) mention that the application of biomedical research principles in some social science research may be problematic. This thesis has shown that researchers' ethical positions do indeed have a role to play in their perceptions towards the REC, and therefore need to be taken into account when understanding the relationship between an REC and the researchers whose applications it reviews.

5.8 Limitations and recommendations for further research

My study highlights the potential of ethics–review to produce, inadvertently, some trends in social research which may contribute to pauperisation of disciplines in terms of both topics researched and methodological approaches followed. In future research, it would therefore be important to determine, empirically, whether an increase in ethics-review requirements over time, which has been the case at the university I studied, is indeed associated with a decrease in research on sensitive topics, and/or research involving in-depth, qualitative approaches.

In addition, the relatively high proportion of social researchers who are undecided on the matter of whether the REC impedes social research, indicates that this sentiment among social researchers is worth exploring in future studies, especially through a more qualitative approach.

5.9 Conclusion

Previous studies have alluded to the overall dissatisfaction of particularly qualitative social researchers with research ethics review processes, but the empirical evidence in this regard is limited, especially in South Africa. This thesis was an attempt at addressing this gap in our knowledge on institutionalised ethics review, by providing an empirical description of social researchers' orientations towards an REC, and how these differ according to their scientific domain, methodological approach and ethical position. While half of social researchers have a positive overall orientation towards the REC, it is necessary for the REC and social researchers at the studied university to focus on addressing negative perceptions in order to improve the relationship between the REC and the social researchers it serves.

This study recommends that the REC should engage with researchers from particularly the natural sciences and engineering, but also those in the domains of the social sciences and humanities. Researchers who tend to prefer qualitative approaches should be targeted in particular. During such discussions, differences between the REC's definition of ethical research and what social researchers consider to be ethical research should be identified, and compromises sought. Finally, this study is quantitative in nature, and is therefore limited in the extent to which it can offer in-depth understanding of the generative mechanisms that underlie the patterns it uncovered. Future research of a qualitative nature on a selection of the most pertinent issues identified in this thesis, is therefore also recommended.

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Appendix A: Ethics approval

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jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

Approved with Stipulations

New Application

08-May-2015
Hendricks, Anri AJ

Ethics Reference #: S15/04/089

Title: **The impact of research ethics review on methodological decisions: perceptions of social researchers at a South African University.**

Dear Ms Anri Hendricks,

The New Application received on **28-Apr-2015**, was reviewed by members of **Health Research Ethics Committee 2** via Expedited review procedures on **04-May-2015**.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: **08-May-2015 -08-May-2016**

The Stipulations of your ethics approval are as follows:
An excellent and well-written protocol.

1. The follow-up requests to non-respondents to participate in the survey (protocol pg. 13) should be limited/kept to a minimum.

Please remember to use your **protocol number** (**S15/04/089**) on any documents or correspondence with the HREC concerning your research protocol.

Please note that the HREC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

After Ethical Review:
Please note a template of the progress report is obtainable on www.sun.ac.za/rds and should be submitted to the Committee before the year has expired. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.
Translation of the consent document to the language applicable to the study participants should be submitted.

Federal Wide Assurance Number: 00001372
Institutional Review Board (IRB) Number: IRB0005239

The Health Research Ethics Committee complies with the SA National Health Act No.61 2003 as it pertains to health research and the United States Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46. This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki, the South African Medical Research Council Guidelines as well as the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health).

Provincial and City of Cape Town Approval

Please note that for research at a primary or secondary healthcare facility permission must still be obtained from the relevant authorities (Western Cape Department of Health and/or City Health) to conduct the research as stated in the protocol. Contact persons are Ms Claudette Abrahams at Western Cape Department of Health (healthres@pgwc.gov.za Tel: +27 21 483 9907) and Dr Helene Visser at City Health (Helene.Visser@capetown.gov.za Tel: +27 21 400 3981). Research that will be conducted at any tertiary academic institution requires approval from the relevant hospital manager. Ethics approval is required BEFORE approval can be obtained from these health authorities.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.
For standard HREC forms and documents please visit: www.sun.ac.za/rds

Appendix B: E-mail invitation letter

Dear academic staff member,

I am conducting an MA (Social Research Methods) study on how social researchers at Stellenbosch University (SU) view research ethics and experience the ethics review process, as undertaken by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) for Human Research (Humanities). I am particularly interested in how the research ethics review process could possibly impact on the methodological choices made by researchers. It is also anticipated that the research will contribute towards improving the ethics review process.

If you or a student you supervise(d) have in the past submitted a social research ethics application to the REC for Human Research (Humanities), or to your Departmental Ethics Screening Committee, you are hereby invited to provide your anonymous insights by responding to an online questionnaire which consists primarily of closed-ended questions. However, the questionnaire also provides you the opportunity to add your own additional inputs, if you choose to do so, in response to a few open-ended questions. You will be asked some basic background information related to your research field (although not sufficiently detailed for you to be identified), and you will be asked to share your position on various ethical issues.

The questionnaire should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Kindly note that only academic staff who have in the past submitted an ethics application for social research, or whose students have done so, need to respond.

Also note that ethical clearance for this study has been granted by SU's Health Research Ethics Committee, and institutional permission has been granted by SU's Division for Institutional Research and Planning.

Your participation in the survey would be greatly appreciated. Please be assured that your responses are completely anonymous.

Click here to consent to participate in the study and to complete the questionnaire.

Thank you in advance!

Kind regards,

Anri Hendricks
Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology
Stellenbosch University

Appendix C: Online questionnaire

UNIVERSITEIT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

***Dear academic researcher,**

Please read the following in order to provide your informed consent:

You were selected as a potential respondent in this survey, because you are a social science researcher who has in the past applied for ethics clearance to the REC for Human Research (Humanities), and/or has supervised postgraduate students who have done so.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please be aware that you are in no way obligated to participate. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question.

Your anonymity will be assured: I will not disclose your identity or any information that might make you identifiable to anyone.

You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this survey.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me (15300943@sun.ac.za; tel. 0737952450) or my supervisor, Dr Heidi Prozesky (hep@sun.ac.za). If you have questions regarding your rights as a respondent, contact Ms Maléne Fouché (mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622) at SU's Division for Research Development.

- ○ Yes, I agree to participate. I have read and understood the consent form. By clicking this button, it serves as my virtual signature.
- ○ No thanks, I don't want to participate.

Thank you for participating in this research study. The following questionnaire will sometimes require you to respond in your capacity as a social researcher, sometimes as a supervisor to postgraduate students, and sometimes both.

A. background information

1. In which discipline(s) do you conduct the majority of your research and/or supervision?

Stellenbosch University https://scholar.sun.ac.za

2.1. In general, which methodological approach do YOU prefer?

- Mostly qualitative, but sometimes quantitative
- Always qualitative
- Mostly quantitative, but sometimes qualitative
- Always quantitative
- Quantitative and qualitative to an equal extent
- Other (please specify):

2.2. In general, which methodological approach do YOUR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS prefer?

- Mostly qualitative, but sometimes quantitative
- Always qualitative
- Mostly quantitative, but sometimes qualitative
- Always quantitative
- Quantitative and qualitative to an equal extent
- Not applicable, as I do not supervise postgraduate students
- Other (please specify):

3.1. Over the past 5 years, approximately what proportion of YOUR OWN applications have been referred to the REC for full review?

- None
- 10 to 20%
- 21 to 49%
- 50%
- More than 50%

3.2. Over the past 5 years, approximately what proportion of YOUR POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' applications have been referred to the REC for full review?

- None
- 10 to 20%
- 21 to 49%
- 50%
- More than 50%
- Not applicable, as I do not supervise postgraduate students

B. ethical positions

The following section focuses on your ethical position as a researcher.

4. Below is a series of general statements. Each statement represents an opinion. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements below:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
4.1. A researcher should make certain that his/her research-related actions never intentionally harm a research participant, even to a small degree.	○	○	○	○	○
4.2. Risks to a research participant should never be tolerated, irrespective of how small the risks might be.	○	○	○	○	○
4.3. The existence of potential harm to research participants is always wrong, irrespective of the benefits in knowledge to be gained.	○	○	○	○	○
4.4. As a researcher, one should never psychologically or physically harm a research participant.	○	○	○	○	○
4.5. As a researcher, one should not perform an action which might in any way threaten the welfare of a research participant.	○	○	○	○	○
4.6. If a research-related action could harm a research participant, then it should not be performed.	○	○	○	○	○
4.7. Deciding whether or not to undertake a research project by balancing the positive consequences of the project against the negative consequences of the project is immoral.	○	○	○	○	○
4.8. The welfare of research participants should be the most important concern in any academic community.	○	○	○	○	○
4.9. It is never justified to sacrifice the welfare of research participants.	○	○	○	○	○
4.10. Ethical research actions are those actions which closely match the ideals of the most "perfect" research action.	○	○	○	○	○
4.11. No ethical principles are that important that they should be part of all codes of research ethics.	○	○	○	○	○
4.12. What is ethical varies from one research context to another.	○	○	○	○	○
4.13. Ethical standards should be seen as being individualistic: what one researcher considers being ethical may be judged unethical by another researcher.	○	○	○	○	○
4.14. Different types of approaches to research ethics cannot be measured by "rightness".	○	○	○	○	○
4.15. Questions of what is ethical for every researcher can never be resolved, since what is ethical or unethical is up to the individual researcher.	○	○	○	○	○
4.16. Ethical standards are simply personal rules which indicate how a researcher should behave, and are not to be applied in making judgements of other researchers.	○	○	○	○	○
4.17. Ethical considerations in interpersonal relations between researcher and research participant are so complex that individual researchers should be allowed to formulate their own individual codes of ethical conduct.	○	○	○	○	○
4.18. Rigidly codifying an ethical position that prevents certain types of research could stand in the way of generating knowledge and training of postgraduate students.	○	○	○	○	○
4.19. No rule concerning the deceiving of research participants can be formulated; whether such deception is permissible should be considered on a case-by-case basis.	○	○	○	○	○
4.20. Whether the deceiving of research participants is judged to be ethical depends upon the research context surrounding the action.	○	○	○	○	○

C. perceptions of social research

In this section, you will be requested to share your understanding of ethical social research.

5. Please respond to the following question in a short paragraph: What does ethical social research mean to you?

6.1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement:

The REC's ethics review process matches my understanding of ethical social research.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

6.2. Please explain your response to the previous question.

7.1. Would you prefer that the REC invites researchers to present their position whenever a question or concern about an application for ethics review arises?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

7.2. Please motivate your response to the previous question.

D. perceptions of ethics review

The following section deals with the extent to which researchers deem ethics review as necessary, as well as their level of acceptance of ethics review in general and of ethics review by the REC in particular.

8. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the statements below:

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
8.1. The REC currently impedes research efforts.	○	○	○	○	○
8.2. I would do more research if there were no REC.	○	○	○	○	○
8.3. I agree with what the REC represents in principle.	○	○	○	○	○

9.1. The manner in which the REC executes its principles is problematic.

Strongly agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4	5

9.2. Please provide a reason for your response to the previous question.

10.1. Ethics review is important.

Strongly agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4	5

10.2. Please provide a reason for your response to the previous question.

11. Overall, the protection offered to research participants by ethics review justifies the effort involved in the review process.

Strongly agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4	5

12. The REC currently facilitates research that is of a higher ethical standard.

Strongly agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4	5

13. The REC is biased in favour of quantitative research.

Strongly agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Strongly disagree
○	○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4	5

E. influence of ethics review on research

In this section, I am interested in whether the ethics review process in any way influences decisions you make when designing your research. How researchers make decisions regarding "sensitive" research topics is a central interest in this regard. "Sensitive" research is understood here as research involving research participants that may be part of a vulnerable or marginalised group such as those with disabilities, people living with HIV/AIDS or other chronic disease, the economically or educationally disadvantaged, abused children, etc.

Please indicate to what extent each of the following applies to you, where 1= never; 2= sometimes; 3= often; and 4= always.

14. I have avoided sensitive topics because of the difficulties involved in gaining ethics clearance for such research.

Never			Always
○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4

15. I have felt the need to change my research design in order to avoid a lengthy and/or complicated ethics clearance process.

Never			Always
○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4

16. I have advised my postgraduate students against researching sensitive topics because of difficulties they will encounter when applying for ethical clearance.

Never			Always
○	○	○	○
1	2	3	4

F. opinion on the REC

In this final section I am interested in your general opinion on the REC.

17.1. Generally speaking, how would you rate your overall experience with the REC until now? (1= very unsatisfactory; 2= unsatisfactory; 3= average; 4= satisfactory; 5= very satisfactory)

1 2 3 4 5

17.2. Please motivate your response to the previous question.

18. If you have any other comments or thoughts that you would like to share about the REC and/or a particular experience with the REC, please do so in the following text box:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!

Thank you for your time!